

# PETER PAN

AND THE

# MIND OF J. M. BARRIE

*An Exploration of Cognition and Consciousness*



**Rosalind Ridley**

What is *Peter Pan* all about? Many of us realise that there is a bit more to the stories than a simple fantasy about flying away to a wonderful place in which to play, and that there is something psychologically rather dark about the events in the stories. But J. M. Barrie's work has not previously been considered from the perspective of either the science of his time, or the insights of modern cognitive psychology. This book explores the texts of *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906) and *Peter and Wendy* (1911), and argues that Barrie describes the limited mental abilities of infants and animals in order to illuminate the structure of human adult cognition. Barrie had a well-informed, post-Darwinian perspective on the biological origins of human behaviour. The idea that human consciousness, cognition, culture and sense of moral responsibility could have origins in animal behaviour was deeply shocking to the nineteenth century intelligentsia, and remains controversial in some sections of academia even today. Barrie's work contains many insights into what is now referred to as mental representation and theory of mind, areas of cognitive psychology that have been examined scientifically only in the last few decades. Barrie also reflects on the nature of consciousness in a way that parallels modern interests. As books with a complex scientific undercurrent, Barrie's *Peter Pan* stories rank alongside Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking Glass*, which engage with complex issues of mathematics and logic, and Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, which explores the implications of evolution for human society.



**Rosalind Ridley**, MA, ScD, is a neuroscientist who spent many years working for the Medical Research Council in London and Cambridge. She is also a retired Fellow of Newnham College, Cambridge. Her work was concerned with understanding the relationship between brain activity and cognition, and its primary purpose was to develop medical treatments for psychological and neurological illnesses, which, in itself, required consideration of the relationship between brain, experience and behaviour, the nature and purpose of consciousness and a broad understanding of biology and evolution. These themes can be found embedded in the works of J. M. Barrie and are explored extensively in this book about *Peter Pan*.

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**Cover image** "Preposterous!" cried Soloman in a rage from *Peter Pan* in *Kensington Gardens*, illustration by Arthur Rackham, 1906



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By

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# Peter Pan and the Mind of J. M. Barrie



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Front Cover. The animals in Kensington Gardens cannot understand the purpose of socially constructed objects.

Plate 1. Barrie is the unseen narrator in Kensington Gardens.

Plate 2. The Duke has to learn that his palpitations mean that he is in love.

Plate 3. Peter is amnesic but can learn about his past from Solomon.

Plate 4. Solomon anticipates the future and saves for his pension.



## PREFACE

My aim in writing this book is not simply to write about J. M. Barrie, or about Peter Pan, or even just to describe what Barrie was doing when he wrote the *Peter Pan* stories. This book is really about what Barrie thought he was doing, or intended to do, when he wrote these stories. Barrie first told the story of Peter Pan to the young boys of the Llewelyn Davies family whom he met while exercising his St. Bernard dog, Porthos, in Kensington Gardens. So, at one level, Barrie was intending to entertain these young children. His play *Peter Pan, or the boy who wouldn't grow up* had many of the features of a pantomime and was aimed mainly at children, although a pantomime has to appeal to adults as well. Barrie had had a difficult childhood and it is clear that part of Barrie's motivation for inventing the stories was to re-engage with his own childhood and to avoid some of the painful challenges presented to him by adult life. These motivations are explored in Part 1 of this book.

But there are more levels to Peter Pan. The stories contain many quirky, nonsensical ideas that Barrie referred to as his whimsicalities. These whimsical ideas comprise deliberate errors of cognition, that is to say, errors in the way we normally structure our thoughts, leading to the suspicion that Barrie was deliberately exploring the nature of cognition in these stories. Why would he do this? He must have found cognition intrinsically interesting, in much the same way that Lewis Carroll was exhibiting his interest in logic and linguistics when he included logical absurdities in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Barrie's whimsicalities serve to compare the cognitive abilities of babies, children, and fairies (who represent children's imagination) to those of adult humans. He is demonstrating that children need to develop cognitively, that is to say, they need to acquire skills of thinking, rather than that they are little adults who need merely to acquire factual information in order to grow up. He was very forward thinking in this respect and much of his motivation seems to have been a plea for a greater understanding of the mental and emotional needs of children.

Barrie not only had an astute understanding of the minds of children, he was also a close observer of the behaviour of animals and he implicitly

compared animals, children and adult humans in the stories of Peter Pan. This reflects the influence that Darwin had had on intellectual thinking in the second half of the nineteenth century and beyond. There had been no need to compare the cognitive mechanisms that controlled the behaviour of animals and humans when animals were mere beasts and Man was made in the image of God. But the theory of evolution had shown that humans were animals and this made animals and humans comparable, not just in their basic anatomy and physiology but in their mental faculties as well. Post-Darwinian anxiety fuelled exploration of these issues, not just amongst scientists, but also in intellectual society in general. Barrie can be seen to be sharing these interests with his educated friends and colleagues. He was a naturalist of the mind, and as such his motivation was a thirst for knowledge. His psychological insights are the subject of Part 2 of this book. My approach has been to look closely at the texts of Barrie's book so that his intention can be considered along side a broader, modern interpretation of the content of his stories.

Many of the behavioural and psychological phenomena that Barrie described can now be understood from a well-established scientific perspective. But cognitive psychology was in its infancy when Barrie was writing so it cannot be said that Barrie incorporated accepted science into his stories. In many cases, his accurate observation of animal and human behaviour precedes the analysis of these behaviours by the scientific community. Like any pioneer, he was probably just intrigued by what he discovered. But he was also a man of his time and in Part 3 I discuss just a few contextual issues that surrounded Barrie in 1900. In my view, Barrie ranks beside Lewis Carroll and Charles Kingsley, author of *The Water-Babies*, as an explorer of science as well as an entertainer of children.

I would like to thank my husband, Harry Baker, for taking my ideas about Peter Pan seriously, reading the text, and helping with the preparation of the manuscript. I thank my friends Rachel Haynes, Robert Fishwick and Richard Hellon for reading substantial parts of the text and Chris Frith for extensive discussions about cognition and for advising me on the whole text.

The illustrations, by Arthur Rackham, were scanned from an early reprint of the first edition of *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*.

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# **PART 1**

## **PETER PAN AND J. M. BARRIE**

*Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.  
—Blaise Pascal. (1)*

## INTRODUCTION TO PART 1

There is something of Peter Pan in all of us: the child who lives in the heart of the adult; memories that we carry with us throughout our life but which do not themselves age; dreams that disobey logic; the private world inside our head and those moments of exceptional experience that we rarely talk about. This is the world of Peter Pan. But James Matthew Barrie (1860-1937) who wrote the stories did not just describe Peter, he dissected the nature of cognition in a manner that was remarkably perspicacious for his time, and which takes us inside the structure of consciousness to explore what it is to be human.

There are two books by J. M. Barrie in which Peter Pan appears as the protagonist: *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (2) and *Peter and Wendy* (3), synopses of which are given below. In these books, Barrie also explored the intellectual issues of the day, many of which had developed from the implications of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (4). Intellectuals of the day were not, for the most part, scriptural fundamentalists and so the concern produced by Darwin's ideas was not so much about the veracity of the first verses of Genesis (5), which even then were regarded largely as a socially cohesive creation myth, but was more about how to define being human (or animal) if humans had evolved from, and therefore were, animals. This comparison was most problematic in the poorly understood realm of psychology. The bodies of humans and animals had obvious similarities and differences, but their minds were more difficult to compare. Barrie attributed limited cognitive abilities to fairies, animals, children and Peter Pan (whom he described as a *Betwixt-and-Between*) in comparison to human adults and, in examining these limitations, he exhibited a profound understanding of human and animal behaviour, particularly with respect to the nature of consciousness and our sense of self. Today these issues are the concern of evolutionary psychology, comparative cognition, and philosophy of mind, and remain amongst the most hotly debated areas of biology. In many instances Barrie seems to have noticed or understood aspects of animal and human behaviour that were not discovered by science until a hundred years later. Barrie demonstrated these insights in many quirky twists to his stories, sometimes known as Barrie-isms, which may be described as mere

whimsy, but which actually map onto important aspects of cognition. My aim will be to demonstrate these from the texts of his books and explain how they are matched by modern experimental psychology.

Barrie was undeniably a strange man with a tragic life and some knowledge of the personal and psychological context in which the books were written is essential if we are to understand the texts. But it is not the main aim of this book to understand Barrie as a person; rather this book seeks to demonstrate his remarkable understanding of post-Darwinian cognitive psychology.



# CHAPTER ONE

## ABOUT PETER PAN

### The Peter Pan Books

The book *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* is about Peter Pan when he was one week old and the book *Peter and Wendy* is about Peter when he was a young boy. In *Peter and Wendy*, Peter seems to be about seven years old although his immaturity is stressed by the claim that he still has all his baby teeth. The text of *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* was first published in 1902 as Chapters XIII to XVIII in the novel *The Little White Bird* (6) but it was then published as a separate book in 1906.

*Peter and Wendy* was published as a novel in 1911 but it was based on the play *Peter Pan, or the boy who wouldn't grow up*, first performed in 1904 (7). The play must have been an extraordinary performance. It had a large cast of speaking parts, including three children, together with an opportunity for a variable number of extras all dressed in elaborate costumes as pirates, Native Americans, fairies, mermaids and animals. There were two large battles, a farcical chase where everyone was running on and off the stage and the children had to fly. This was achieved by raising the actors off the ground using a harness and pulleys. This was a novel event for the stage. The children in the audience would have been completely taken in by this and the adults would have been frightened that an accident might happen. The children were invited to clap if they believed in fairies. This is also an early example of the currently popular genre of interactive fiction because if the children had not clapped, the fairy Tinker Bell would have died, there would have been no fairy dust to enable the children to fly home and everything would have ended in catastrophe.

The play underwent many changes in text from its first performance to the definitive script published in 1928. I will only comment occasionally on the final script of the play because most of the Barrie-isms also appear in *Peter and Wendy* or could not be incorporated in the speech or stage