

*Toast and the Familiar in Children's Literature*

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When Lewis Carroll's Alice ventures to taste the little bottle labeled "drink me," she finds that "(it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pine-apple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast)," and, as a consequence, "she very soon finished it off."<sup>1</sup> Robert Hemmings, drawing attention to the "taste of nostalgia" in so-called golden age children's literature, points to the highly specific tastes and smells in this passage, which "are rich with associations of a privileged middle-class Victorian childhood, both Alice Liddell's and Charles Dodgson's: exotic fruit, desserts, a roast dripping with holiday associations, comforting toast, candy, nary a vegetable to wrinkle a child's nose."<sup>2</sup> The hot buttered toast Alice mentions, and Hemmings emphasizes as "comforting," would seem to be a prime example of nostalgia-invoking, non-vegetable, unobjectionable food. While it is "rich with associations of a privileged middle-class Victorian childhood," it also seems more accessible to a broader range of readers than, say, cherry tart or custard. It is less costly than any of the other foods Alice mentions. Barely needing to be cooked, it doesn't seem to require money, skill, time, or expertise. Surely almost anyone would have access to toast. It also promises to be a better time traveler than the other foods. Toast seems a food that readers now will recognize (as they do not, for example, the pickled limes in *Little Women*). Is it necessary, for instance, for an edition to provide a note for toast, to describe or define it? In its very familiarity, buttered toast might seem to be the perfect comestible to sum up the golden age of children's literature: it calls to mind the Victorian nursery, or at least a vision of that nursery that has been created precisely through

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (New York: Penguin/Signet, 2012), 14. I am grateful to Elizabeth Crachiolo for her help researching this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Hemmings, "A Taste of Nostalgia: Children's Books from the Golden Age – Carroll, Grahame, and Milne," *Children's Literature* 35 (2007): 54–79, esp. 62. On food and nostalgia in children's literature, see also Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Allen and Bacon, 2003).

such representations, yet it is recognizable to many a young reader today, creating another filament of connection between reader and characters and drawing the reader into the imagined world. In this chapter, I will make the familiarity of toast a question rather than an assumption, focusing on toast in *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), *Mary Poppins* (1934), the Harry Potter series (1997–2007), and *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999–2006). To what extent does toast connect readers across time and place and to what extent is it becoming an exotic comestible?

In another memorable moment from golden age children's literature in which food and nostalgia intertwine, the gaoler's daughter in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* brings buttered toast to Toad when he is imprisoned. She proposes to tame Toad so that he will be a less sulky prisoner and even, perhaps, one more likely to purchase the "comforts, and indeed luxuries" her father hopes to sell the affluent Toad. "You let me have the managing of him," she tells her father. "You know how fond of animals I am. I'll make him eat from my hand, and sit up, and do all sorts of things." Ultimately, her attempt to domesticate the wild toad leads her to help him escape. But it begins with food. First, she offers to share her food with him, bringing in some of her own dinner, "hot from the oven."<sup>3</sup> It is bubble and squeak, a dish of cooked cabbage usually mixed with mashed potatoes, fried in a pan to form a crust. In the hot pan, the fat in which the patty browns bubbles and squeaks, giving the dish its name. It is one of those dishes that transforms leftovers into something transcendent. I find it comforting; Toad does not. While the dish's name emphasizes its sound, the narrator of *The Wind in the Willows* emphasizes its smell. There is no description of what bubble and squeak is or looks like. But, we learn, "its fragrance filled the narrow cell. The penetrating smell of cabbage reached the nose of Toad as he lay prostrate in his misery on the floor, and gave him the idea for a moment that perhaps life was not such a blank and desperate thing as he had imagined." Although Toad is perked up by the encouraging smell, he finally "refused to be comforted" and spurns this plebeian dish.<sup>4</sup> The narrator's reference to the smell of the cabbage, which lingers even after the dish has left Toad's cell, calls up the persistent associations of smelly cabbage with the poor and immigrant people who eat it.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (New York: Aladdin/Simon and Schuster, 1989), 147.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> For the long history of these associations around cabbage, see Malcolm Thick, "Root Crops and the Feeding of London's Poor," in *English Rural Society*, edited by John Chartres and David Hey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 279–96, esp. 288; Margaret Pelling, *The Common Lot: Sickness, Medical Occupations and the Urban Poor in Early Modern England* (London: Longman,

When the gaoler's daughter returns several hours later, she brings a meal that neither the narrator nor Toad can resist: a cup of "fragrant" tea and "a plate piled up with very hot buttered toast, cut thick, very brown on both sides, with the butter running through the holes in it in great golden drops, like honey from the honeycomb."<sup>6</sup> The reader can immediately imagine this toast. Fragrance is again paramount, as it is throughout this book because, as the narrator says in an earlier chapter, the word "smell" is inadequate to describe "an animal's intercommunications with his surroundings," the ways that he feels the olfactory with his whole body.<sup>7</sup> Just as the name "bubble and squeak" assigns a kind of voice to that dish, so the narrator grants the toast's smell a synesthetic ability to communicate: "the smell of that buttered toast simply spoke to Toad, and with no uncertain voice." The narrator then proceeds to elaborate on what that very particular toast said to Toad: it "talked of warm kitchens, of breakfasts on bright frosty mornings, of cozy parlour firesides on winter evenings, when one's ramble was over and slipped feet were propped on the fender; of the purring of contented cats, and the twitter of sleepy canaries."<sup>8</sup> As C. W. Sullivan has pointed out, the gaoler's daughter "provokes nostalgia from Toad for his home, for the first time, by bringing him the toast."<sup>9</sup> The toast, then, achieves something Toad's friends have failed to do. *The Wind in the Willows* is filled with picnics, impromptu suppers, hearty breakfasts, and banquets. Our protagonists and those they encounter tend to provision resourcefully and to eat everything set before them with relish. But it is the buttered toast, served to the despondent Toad in jail, that has the greatest impact.

This passage assumes that an expressive smell will speak to the reader as powerfully as it does to Toad, readily evoking cozy domesticity. For many readers, it still does. Many would need a gloss for bubble and squeak, although *The Annotated Wind in the Willows* glosses cabbage here but not bubble and squeak.<sup>10</sup> Even those who know the dish know it is unglissable,

1998), 38–62; Emma Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England 1600–1770* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 84 and passim.

<sup>6</sup> Grahame, *Wind in the Willows*, 145–46.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–86.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>9</sup> C. W. Sullivan, "'Chops ... Cheese, New Bread, Great Swills of Beer': Food and Home in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 15.2 (Spring 2005): 144–52, esp. 149. On food in *Wind in the Willows*, see also Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children's Literature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985); Peter Hunt, *The Wind in the Willows: A Fragmented Arcadia* (New York: Twayne, 1994), who twice refers to hot buttered toast as a "nursery delight" (38, 87).

<sup>10</sup> *The Annotated Wind in the Willows* offers this gloss: "*Cabbage*. Compared to buttered toast and all the other food feasted upon at Toad Hall, cabbage would reek. It was also known to be the fare of

in a way, in that each bubble and squeak is a little different. If cold tongue, which appears several times in the novel, is the food that might not necessarily whet modern readers' appetites, "fantastic" rather than familiar food, toast would seem to be the foodstuff that is not in need of explanation or definition.<sup>11</sup> Toast is toast. And yet, as that vivid, even rapturous, description also makes clear, all toast is NOT toast. There are thinly sliced, under and over browned, inadequately buttered toasts. There is cold toast. At the end of the novel, when Toad and his friends have reclaimed Toad Hall, Toad "came down to breakfast disgracefully late" to find only the sad remnants of a breakfast, including "some fragments of cold and leathery toast."<sup>12</sup> Such toast would not jog Toad's memory or burnish his attachment to life. Frances Hodgson Burnett is reported to have said that "It is not enough to mention" that your characters have tea; "you must specify the muffins."<sup>13</sup> You must also specify whether the muffins are toasted and how well they are buttered, as Grahame's description of the toast that reattaches Toad to his life suggests.

While Toad's fortunes go up and down, he never makes his own toast. The toast Alice remembers was probably brought to her on a tray as well. This suggests both the freedom from labor and the dependency of those who do not make their own toast and must rely on the tender mercies of other toasters and risk the perils of toast not to their own specifications. In Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861), she offers instructions first on how "To Make Dry Toast." To make it properly, she explains, "a great deal of attention is required; much more, indeed, than people generally suppose."<sup>14</sup> One must not use fresh bread, because it "eats heavy, and, besides, is very extravagant." Instead, "a loaf of household bread about two days old" is perfect. It should be "not quite  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch in thickness," with crusts trimmed. The toast-maker must then

put the bread on a toasting-fork, and hold it before a very clear fire. Move it backwards and forwards until the bread is nicely coloured; then turn it

a commoner." *The Annotated Wind in the Willows*, edited by Annie Gauger (New York: Norton, 2009), 188, n. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Hunt, "Coldtonguecoldhamcoldbeepickledgherkinsaladfrenchrollscresssandwidespottedmeatgingerbeerlemonadesodawater ...: Fantastic Foods in the Books of Kenneth Grahame, Jerome K. Jerome, H. E. Bates and Other Bakers of the Fantasy England," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 7.1 (1996): 5–22.

<sup>12</sup> Grahame, *Wind in the Willows*, 248.

<sup>13</sup> Ann Thwaite, *Waiting for the Party: The Life of Frances Hodgson Burnett* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1991), 222.

<sup>14</sup> Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management* (London: S. O. Beeton, 1861), 843. Searchable versions of this text are widely available and the recipes for toast are listed as entries 1725 and 1726.

and toast the other side, and do not place it so near the fire that it blackens. Dry toast should be more gradually made than buttered toast, as its great beauty consists in its crispness, and this cannot be attained unless the process is slow and the bread is allowed gradually to colour. It should never be made long before it is wanted, as it soon becomes tough, unless placed on the fender in front of the fire. As soon as each piece is ready, it should be put into a rack, or stood upon its edges, and sent quickly to table.<sup>15</sup>

The emphasis here on speed reminds us that these are instructions for making toast for other people and getting it to them in prime condition. The following recipe, for how "To make hot buttered toast" explains that one needs "nice even slices ... rather more than ¼ inch in thickness."

Toast them before a very bright fire, without allowing the bread to blacken, which spoils the appearance and flavor of all toast. When of a nice colour on both sides, put it on a hot plate; divide some good butter into small pieces, place them on the toast, set this before the fire, and when the butter is just beginning to melt, spread it lightly over the toast. Trim off the crust and ragged edges, divide each round into 4 pieces, and send the toast quickly to table ... It is highly essential to use good butter for making this dish.<sup>16</sup>

Toast is, then, a dish, and one that requires "household bread," "good butter," "a great deal of attention," a bright fire, and careful timing.

Has the invention of the toaster created a world in which even Toad might make his own toast? Dinah Bucholz's *The Unofficial Harry Potter Cookbook* explains that she "does not include a recipe for toast, although Victorian cookbooks [such as Mrs. Beeton] devoted chapters to the art of making toast properly. Today, with toasters and toaster ovens, it's pretty simple if you just pay attention."<sup>17</sup> By this account, toast is both easier to achieve and more familiar for us than it was for the Victorians. Toast is often taken as the gauge of basic culinary literacy and self-reliance. Novice cooks claim that all they can make is toast; the pithy description of someone who absolutely cannot cook is that he or she "can't even make toast." Toast is, then, beginner cooking. Parenting sites advise that "Toast is a great way to help children start 'cooking' on their own."<sup>18</sup> In Lemony

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 844.

<sup>17</sup> Dinah Bucholz, *The Unofficial Harry Potter Cookbook: From Cauldron Cakes to Knickerbocker Glory – More Than 150 Magical Recipes for Wizards and Non-Wizards Alike* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2010), 106.

<sup>18</sup> [www.cozi.com/blog/10-snacks-kids-can-make-themselves](http://www.cozi.com/blog/10-snacks-kids-can-make-themselves). See also <http://eats.coolmompicks.com/2016/08/13/easy-breakfast-recipes-kids-can-cook>. A cookbook for children, Carol Odell and Anna Pignataro's *Once Upon a Time in the Kitchen: Recipes and Tales from Classic Children's Stories* (Ann Arbor: Sleeping Bear Press, 2010), assumes that its readers know how to make toast although it does advise that, should the reader wish to make toast as Doctor Doolittle did, by holding the bread on a

Snicket's *The Bad Beginning*, when the villainous Count Olaf challenges the Baudelaire orphans to make dinner for his friends, even the intrepid Violet feels at first that she might not be up to the challenge. "I don't know how to make anything except toast." As her brother Klaus reminds her, she doesn't even know how to do that. "Sometimes you burn the toast," he reminds her.

They were both remembering a time when the two of them got up early to make a special breakfast for their parents. Violet had burned the toast, and their parents, smelling smoke, had run downstairs to see what the matter was. When they saw Violet and Klaus, looking forlornly at pieces of pitch-black toast, they laughed and laughed, and then made pancakes for the whole family.<sup>19</sup>

Here it is the memory of "pitch-black toast," and of the luxury of not having to eat it, that provokes nostalgia for the lost family and home, losses that, in the world of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, cannot be recuperated. (With pantry staples and a cookbook from Judge Strauss, the Baudelaire do, however, pull off Pasta Puttanesca.) *A Series of Unfortunate Events* gestures back to the Victorian houses, to the orphans and villains, of golden age children's literature in lots of ways. In Klaus and Violet's memory here, we are informed that children do not generally cook for their parents, except on special occasions, and that the Baudelaire orphans, before finding themselves Count Olaf's drudges, were as privileged as Alice or Toad. They would not have made their own toast. The memory of the burnt toast is a memory of not needing to be competent, of trying to be the caretaker, failing, and not having it matter. The toast also stands for the "charred rubble" of the "enormous home they had loved," the house and parents destroyed by fire.<sup>20</sup> One might almost imagine Lemony Snicket interrupting to explain what the word toast here means.

If *A Series of Unfortunate Events* takes place in a hard-to-specify time and place, with cars and surveillance cameras but few other reminders of the modern day, the Harry Potter series takes place in an alternative reality that does not include the internet, cell phones, or iPads. Rowling's inventiveness in creating a fully realized world apart from our own extends to butter

fork in front of a fire, you must "be very careful not to toast yourself" (7). Lyn Stallworth provides a recipe for "Toad's Buttered Toast" in her cookbook *Wond'rous Fare* (Chicago: Calico, 1988), but it is actually a recipe for French Toast, as if buttered toast is a little too simple to require a recipe or constitute the "wond'rous."

<sup>19</sup> Lemony Snicket, *Series of Unfortunate Events #1: The Bad Beginning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

beer and the remarkable sweets at Honeyduke's. The food at Hogwarts is both fantastic and familiar. It is overwhelmingly abundant and appears and disappears magically – although it depends on the hidden labors of house elves.<sup>21</sup> It is also distinctly British, which would make it familiar to some readers but not to others. On his first night at Hogwarts, “Harry had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table.” What he likes, it appears, is meat and potatoes in varied forms, with the distinctly British addition of “Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup.” For the first time, he is “allowed to eat as much as he liked.”<sup>22</sup> If this is special occasion dining at Hogwarts, toast is daily fare. In *Chamber of Secrets*, for example, we learn that the breakfast tables in the Great Hall were “laden with tureens of porridge, plates of kippers, mountains of toast, and dishes of eggs and bacon.”<sup>23</sup>

Given the international audience for the series, those mountains of toast may require some explanation, if not a recipe. The Harry Potter Wiki feels the need to define toast in its own entry: “Toast is bread that has been toasted. Toast is also a known flavour of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, and was served at breakfast time at Hogwarts.”<sup>24</sup> The entry is accompanied by a picture of toast in a toast rack and the explanation that the house elves and probably Molly Weasley “manufacture” it. With its usual attention to detail, the Wiki also glosses bread and toaster, “a Muggle device used to toast Bread” owned by the Dursley family. In the global marketplace for the new golden age of children's literature, even toast, even bread, cannot go without explanation. But the Wiki also claims that, at Hogwarts, toast is “floating around between the tables” in the Great Hall so that students can just reach out and grab a slice. This is an appealing notion. Suspended in air, toast would seem magically unlimited (and, one hopes, perpetually hot), rising above the stodginess that threatens to weigh comfort foods (and their eaters) down. By floating, the familiar becomes just fantastic enough. Yet this claim seems to be invented or misremembered. In the books, we are never told that toast floats nor does it appear to float in the

<sup>21</sup> Jacqueline Corinth, “Food Symbolism in Three Children's Literature Texts: Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and Rowling's Harry Potter Novels,” in *You Are What You Eat: Literary Probes into the Palate*, edited by Annette M. Magid (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 260–83, esp. 272–73.

<sup>22</sup> J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastic, 1997), 123.

<sup>23</sup> J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic, 1998), 86. We are told that toast is part of Harry's breakfast at various other points, including *Sorcerer's Stone*, chapters 8 and 11, and *Prisoner of Azkaban*, chapter 9.

<sup>24</sup> <http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Toast> (accessed April 3, 2018). We learn about the flavor of beans in *Sorcerer's Stone*, page 104.

movies. In a fan-community obsessed with accuracy, this fantasy about a familiar food suggests, again, how toast is both familiar and fantastic, a given and in need of a gloss, a staple and an occasion for flights of fancy.

In its association with white foods and white people, with tea and the golden age of nursery repasts, toast sometimes stands as the food from which the increasingly ethnically diverse protagonists of children's literature depart. Pamela Munoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising*, which in many ways rewrites earlier (toast-filled) precedents such as *A Little Princess*, never mentions toast. The book is organized around produce (which does not include wheat) and the characters make and eat tortillas but never toast. Critic Lan Dong emphasizes the "difference" of the protagonist in Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) by describing what she doesn't eat: her "usual school-day breakfast is not cereal, milk, orange juice, toast, pancake, or omelet." Instead, she eats rice, soup, savory and spicy foods.<sup>25</sup> For many readers and protagonists, toast is not necessarily familiar.

Bread has a well-browned reputation as the staff of life, as a basic, unobjectionable, and irreplaceable food.<sup>26</sup> For example, writing in the seventeenth century, Thomas Moffett assumes "the dignity and necessity of Bread" and insists that it is one food everyone likes: "Bread is a food so necessary to the life of man, that whereas many meats be loathed naturally, of some persons, yet we never saw, read, nor heard of any man that naturally hated bread."<sup>27</sup> This is no longer true, since gluten-free and grain-free diets are in vogue, and bread has suddenly become a vilified foodstuff. Perhaps predictably it has simultaneously achieved a cachet that long eluded it. Artisanal loaves glow on the covers of food magazines, which promise that you can achieve such results at home. The current fashion for toast suggests how the mundane can become the fashionable and how prohibition prompts desire. Various bakeries offer what is called "artisanal toast." By one account, for example, "'Artisanal' toast is made from inch-thick, snow-white or grainy slices, lathered in butter and cinnamon or peanut butter and honey, then wrapped individually in wax paper."<sup>28</sup> This

<sup>25</sup> Lan Dong, "Eating Different, Looking Different: Food in Asian American Childhood," in *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*, edited by Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard (London: Routledge, 2009), 137–48, esp. 144.

<sup>26</sup> Scott Shershow, *Bread* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Moffett, *Healths Improvement: Or, Rules Comprizing and Discovering the Nature, Method, and Manner of Preparing All Sorts of Food Used in This Nation*, corrected and enlarged by Christopher Bennet (London, 1655), 265.

<sup>28</sup> Eliza Barclay, "We Didn't Believe in 'Artisanal' Toast until We Made Our Own," *The Salt*, NPR, April 22, 2014, [www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/04/22/30563252/we-didnt-believe-in-artisanal-toast-until-we-made-our-own](http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/04/22/30563252/we-didnt-believe-in-artisanal-toast-until-we-made-our-own).

description belies the freighted choices of bread and topping, choices that can paralyze. But while these vary, "artisanal toast" is distinguished by its thickness and its cost, infamously \$4 a slice (and destined to rise) at Trouble in Oakland, California, one of the places credited with and blamed for this trend. As my niece and co-eater pointed out as we conducted research on this toast, "the topping goes all the way to the edge." No slapdash buttering and missed edges here. We watched four people carefully divide one piece of peanut butter toast, treating each quarter as a precious indulgence; but we also saw quite a few customers sheepishly approach the counter for a second round of pricey toast. The food of last resort has become a destination treat. The food you are supposed to be able to make for yourself is once again outsourced to experts. They serve us but we also have to count on them to get it right.

Once my mother, a legendary baker, asked her own mother, also a great baker, what treat she would most like for an upcoming holiday. My grandmother was, at that time, living in a nursing home (where she occasionally oversaw the baking of apple pies for the nuns, to great acclaim). Without hesitation, she announced that what she wanted, above all, was toast. Her request was a detailed denunciation of what was passing for toast at Villa St. Cyril and an unintentional homage to Mrs. Beeton. She wanted good bread (homemade, of course), well-toasted, lavishly buttered, and served HOT. So the centerpiece of that holiday meal was toast on demand. We would run the hot toast directly from the toaster to Gramma. She ate an unconscionable amount and damned the consequences. My point here is that just as toast can speak of comfort and contentment, it can also disappoint and dispirit. People have very strong opinions about toast.

A quick look at the etymology of toast suggests that it has always been lathered with associations and that it has steadily accrued meanings over time. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes it as meaning, originally, "A piece of bread browned before the fire, often put in wine or ale." Because of that status as something to float in a beverage, toast evolved to mean "one to whom toasts are drunk" as in being "the toast of the town." This is, according to the *OED*, a figurative application of the noun toast, in that the name of the person being honored is "supposed to flavour a bumper like a spiced toast in the drink." There may also be a slide here from what floats in the cup to the person to whom the cup is lifted. As a verb, "to toast" is the act of browning and crisping the bread but also, by extension, the act of warming one's feet, or melting cheese, or of lifting a glass. The noun form has a long history of usage to describe physical comfort as in "to be warm (and dry) as toast." "Hot as toast" can mean eager or keen as well as

cozy. The colloquial uses of toast suggest that it has a dark side. To be “had on toast” might mean to have been swindled; to have someone on toast is to have them at one’s mercy. In specifically US slang, toast can refer to a “person or thing that is defunct, dead, finished, in serious trouble,” apparently following from Bill Murray’s ad lib in the 1983 film *Ghostbusters*, in which the script’s “I’m gonna turn this guy into toast” became “This chick is toast.”<sup>29</sup> Like “baked,” “toasted” can mean intoxicated. This rich constellation of meanings provides further evidence that toast’s status as “comfort food” is more complicated than it might at first appear. Is toast toast as in consigned to the past? Over? The vogue for artisanal toast suggests not. But toast makes its claims on our appetites and wallets for the same reason it works as a provocation in children’s literature – because it seems to hearken back to lost consolations but also, like so much in children’s literature, because it contains some uncertainty. The celebration of hot buttered toast warns that toast can be cold or burned; the delicious arrival of the gaoler’s daughter relies on the awareness that she might not always turn up – with a generous portion of perfect toast.

In children’s literature, toast takes its place on a table that is laden with fantastical sweets and body parts, feasts and famine.<sup>30</sup> While food is sometimes associated with comfort and nurture more broadly, it is often scarce or poisonous. Fairy tales famously rely on starvation, cannibalism, and hunger. They turn on mysterious and incurable cravings (“Rapunzel”), poisoned gifts of food (“Snow White”), and an astonishing amount of cannibalism (“Snow White,” “The Juniper Tree,” and “Sun, Moon, and Talia”). Growing out of this tradition, in Maurice Sendak’s classic *Where the Wild Things Are* eating is both an expression of aggression, when Max threatens his mother that “I’ll eat you,” and of love, when the wild things beg him not to leave them: “We’ll eat you up we love you so.”

Considering toast in the context of other foods in children’s literature, it’s easier to see that since food is never simply comforting, toast might be more complicated as well. I want to conclude by considering the small detail that Mary Poppins is said to smell like toast. The first reference to this appears quite late in the first book, in the Bad Tuesday chapter. Michael

<sup>29</sup> William Safire, “History Is Toast,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 20, 1997, [www.nytimes.com/1997/04/20/magazine/history-is-toast.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/20/magazine/history-is-toast.html).

<sup>30</sup> On food in children’s literature, see also Bridget Carrington and Jennifer Harding, *Feast or Famine?: Food and Children’s Literature* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014); Carolyn Daniel, *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children’s Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Note that food is not one of the headings in Philip Nel and Lissa Paul, eds., *Keywords for Children’s Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

wakes up in a foul mood and is naughty all day until Mary rescues him from the menacing specters of creatures they have visited that day. This is the one chapter of the book that was revised. Modern editions specify that this chapter is the "revised version." For decades after its publication in 1934, critics objected to the racial stereotypes in this chapter, in which Mary uses a magical compass to take the children around the world to visit Eskimo, Chinese, African, and Native American families. P. L. Travers finally revised the chapter, turning humans into animals; the illustrator Mary Shepard revised the illustration of the compass as well. But the revision is haunted by the racist content it has tried to banish or ameliorate. This is the climactic moment in the original version:

A noise behind the chair startled him and he turned round guiltily, expecting to see Mary Poppins. But instead there were four gigantic figures bearing down towards him – the Eskimo with a spear, the Negro Lady with her husband's huge club, the Mandarin with a great curved sword, and the Red Indian with a tomahawk. They were rushing upon him from all four quarters of the room with their weapons raised above their heads, and, instead of looking kind and friendly as they had done that afternoon, they now seemed threatening and full of revenge. They were almost on top of him, their huge, terrible, angry faces looming nearer and nearer. He felt their hot breath on his face and saw their weapons tremble in their hands.<sup>31</sup>

The revised version says that: "there were four gigantic figures bearing down upon him – the bear with his fangs showing, the Macaw fiercely flapping his wings, the Panda with his fur on end, the Dolphin thrusting out her snout. From all quarters of the room they were rushing upon him, their shadows huge on the ceiling. No longer kind and friendly, they were now full of revenge."<sup>32</sup> In both versions, Michael's fear leads him to call out for Mary Poppins – "Mary Poppins, help me!" – and his request for her help breaks the spell, banishing his assailants and his fears about what they might be "planning to do to him." This rescue enables him to make his peace with his dependence on Mary Poppins. "And, oh, the burning thing that had been inside him all day had melted and disappeared."<sup>33</sup> It is at this point in both the original version and the revised one that we learn for the first time in the series how Mary Poppins smells: "He could smell her crackling white apron and the faint flavor of toast that always hung about her so deliciously."<sup>34</sup> The burning thing that is his own resistance to

<sup>31</sup> P. L. Travers, *Mary Poppins* (Orlando: Harcourt/Odyssey, 1934), 65.

<sup>32</sup> P. L. Travers, *Mary Poppins*, revised ed. (Orlando: Harcourt/Odyssey, 1981), 100.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

her authority melts into the savor of toast that attaches to her, browned but not burned. The possibility that Michael could eat Mary Poppins replaces his fear that he will be killed or even eaten by the terrifying creatures and accompanies his relief at her rescue. This savor of toast – simultaneously a smell and a “flavor” – then becomes a feature of descriptions of Mary throughout the series, always touched on in passing.<sup>35</sup>

The association of Mary with toast would seem to reinforce her status as a source of comfort. But Mary is never simply that. When she first arrives, Michael asks “you’ll never leave us, will you?”<sup>36</sup> Mary responds by looking “very fierce” and warning “One more word from that direction . . . and I’ll call the Policeman.” She promises only that “I’ll stay till the wind changes” and that’s what she does. Caitlin Flanagan argues that Michael’s question is “the great question of childhood, the question upon which all the Mary Poppins books turn: is the person on whom a child relies for the foundation of his existence – food and warmth and love at its most elemental – about to disappear?”<sup>37</sup> What makes the series so fascinating is that the answer is yes. She will leave. But then again, she will also come back. Mary’s appeal to the children is not that she is safe but that she is remarkable. “Michael suddenly discovered that you could not look at Mary Poppins and disobey her. There was something strange and extraordinary about her – something that was frightening and at the same time most exciting.” “She’s different. She’s the Great Exception,” the Starling confirms.<sup>38</sup>

Food is one of the ways that Mary marks herself and her associates as extraordinary and unsettling. When she first meets the Banks children, she doses them with a cordial that adapts to suit each consumer, ignoring Jane’s worry that the infant twins, John and Barbara, are too young and serving it to them as well. In the second chapter of the novel, Mary has a day out, reminding readers that she has a life separate from the children, who appear only in the chapter’s frame, and that she particularly likes raspberry-jam cakes. When she takes Jane and Michael to have tea with her uncle, Mr. Wigg, they all float up and enjoy their tea in the air. What’s more, Mr. Wigg announces that, rather than beginning with the

<sup>35</sup> In the next book in the series, *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, we learn that “she smelt deliciously of newly made toast.” P. L. Travers, *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1997), 23. See also P. L. Travers, *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1943), 23; P. L. Travers, *Mary Poppins in the Park* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), 105–6.

<sup>36</sup> Travers, *Mary Poppins*, revised edition, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Caitlin Flanagan, “Becoming Mary Poppins: P. L. Travers, Walt Disney, and the Making of a Myth,” *New Yorker*, December 19, 2005, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/12/19/becoming-mary-poppins](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/12/19/becoming-mary-poppins).

<sup>38</sup> Travers, *Mary Poppins*, revised edition, 12, 142.

bread-and-butter, "we will begin the wrong way – which I always think is the *right* way – with the Cake!"<sup>39</sup> On a visit to Mrs. Corry's shop, Mrs. Corry does not feed the twins from the glass cases of gingerbread. Instead, "She broke off two of her fingers and gave one each to John and Barbara. And the oddest part of it was that in the space left by the broken-off fingers two new ones grew at once."<sup>40</sup> Food is everywhere in this first book in the Mary Poppins series. But it often serves to emphasize the inversion of expectations rather than simply comfort or nurture.

This is most clear in the chapter in which Mary Poppins takes the children on a night visit to the zoo when her birthday falls on a full moon. There they find a world turned upside down, with human beings in the cages and talking animals on the prowl. The Hamadryad, who turns out to be related to Mary Poppins, reflects on the relationship between eating and being eaten.

"Tonight the small are free from the great and the great protect the small. Even I –," he paused and seemed to be thinking deeply, "even *I* can meet a Barnacle Goose without any thought of dinner – on this occasion. And after all," he went on, flicking his terrible little forked tongue in and out as he spoke, "it may be that to eat and be eaten are the same thing in the end. My wisdom tells me that this is probably so. We are all made of the same stuff, remember, we of the Jungle, you of the City. The same substance composes us – the tree overhead, the stone beneath us, the bird, the beast, the star – we are all one, all moving to the same end. Remember that when you no longer remember me, my child."<sup>41</sup>

The Hamadryad is Mary Poppins' "first cousin once removed – on the mother's side."<sup>42</sup> He sends her, for her birthday, one of his own cast skins, to wear as a belt. At the end of the chapter, Mary is wearing this belt as she makes toast at the fire – the only cooking she does. Just as, in *Alice's Adventures*, the pigeon fears that the long-necked Alice is a serpent who will eat her eggs – "You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!" – here we are reminded that Mary both smells good enough to eat and is related to predators.<sup>43</sup> She is a feeder, an eater, and a comestible. Considered in the context of the novel as a whole, the claim that Mary Poppins smells like

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>43</sup> Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 44.

toast contributes to the characterization of her as magnetic, drawing the children to her, but also unpredictable.

Making toast in her snakeskin belt, she sums up the complex associations of toast with comfort and despair, sensuality and dependency, female nurture and authority, domesticity and the occult. Mary Poppins is a kind of witch, able to fly, to communicate with animals, and to defy the rules that govern other people's possibilities. As a servant who promptly takes charge, her paradoxical status resembles that of many accused witches, who were both socially subordinated and assigned enormous power. Mary Poppins also resembles the familiar, the small animal who acts as a witch's agent. Keith Thomas has called the familiar a "peculiarly English" feature of witchlore.<sup>44</sup> These small animals – weasels, mice, toads, and cats, among others – might seem unthreatening and unimportant. But precisely for that reason they could easily insinuate themselves into domestic spaces. What made these creatures familiar is precisely what made them dangerous: they were intimate with the witch, acting as extensions of her agency; they might not provoke suspicion because of their tiny size and resemblance to domesticated animals or vermin, familiar occupants of human spaces, and so could go anywhere. The familiar is the creature who belongs but remains strange, the creature we recognize but cannot really know or trust. Toast in children's literature, I have been arguing, is familiar in this sense. It is a known quantity. It is nugatory. But it can also be strange, alienating, inspiring – even powerful. It is both daily fare and an exotic dish that requires a recipe, a special occasion, a trip, and \$4. While the smell of buttered toast still speaks to many readers, what it has to say is not necessarily simple, predictable, or intelligible.

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<sup>44</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), 445–46. See also Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550–1700* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); James Sharpe, "The Witch's Familiar in Elizabethan England," in *Authority and Consent in Tudor England: Essays Presented to C. S. L. Davies*, edited by G. W. Bernard and S. J. Gunn (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 219–32, esp. 226.

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