The Magic Pudding

It never occurred to me that the little work would be popular but GR [George Roberston] thought otherwise when I passed the m.s. on to him. He appears to have been right.

— Norman Lindsay, undated letter

In October 1918 Angus & Robertson published what would become one of Australia’s best known children’s stories. Released a month before the end of the First World War, just in time for Christmas, The Magic Pudding was the first of only two children’s books written and illustrated by Norman Lindsay.

This October marks the 100th anniversary of this whimsical Australian tale about a group of travellers — Bill Barnacle, Sam Sawnoff and Bunyip Bluegum — who wander aimlessly through the bush, sustaining themselves on an inexhaustible ‘magic pudding’ named Albert.

The idea for the book came from a bet between Lindsay and his friend Bertram Stevens, the editor of Art in Australia. The pair were discussing ‘popular motifs in books for children’. Stevens was of the opinion that fairies formed the most fascinating subject matter; but Lindsay, based on his theory ‘that infantile concepts of happiness are based on the belly’, felt that children would prefer food. On being told about the conversation, publisher George Robertson is reported to have said, ‘If you can persuade him to write a story for children, you’re on for a fiver.’

During the First World War Lindsay produced war cartoons and recruitment posters. One evening he began jotting down nonsense about Bunyip Bluegum. He found it amusing to experiment with nonsense verses, even though they were ‘not so easy to write as their simplicity would suggest’.

He then produced 102 drawings for the book, which was ingeniously divided into ‘slices’ rather than chapters. He wrote the prose and verse in an unmistakable style, featuring the Australian vernacular of the time.

The first edition of The Magic Pudding was produced as a ‘guinea book’, a limited edition high-quality art book sold for 1 guinea (21 shillings). The first 50 copies of the first edition featured light green A&R monogrammed endpapers designed by Walter Syer. The others are distinguished by a blue spine and cream endpapers.

Portraits of Norman and Lionel Lindsay, family and friends, ca. 1900-1912 / photographed chiefly by Lionel Lindsay [1]
Portraits of Norman and Lionel Lindsay, family and friends, ca. 1900-1912 / photographed chiefly by Lionel Lindsay,
The magic pudding: being the adventures of Bunyip Bluegum and his friends Bill Barnacle and Sam Sawnoff
The magic pudding : being the adventures of Bunyip Bluegum and his friends Bill Barnacle and Sam Sawnoff, 1918


View collection item detail

Lindsay disagreed with the high price of his book, believing it should have been ‘sold at a price that would allow the kid to tear it with a clear conscience’. The prospectus for the first edition advised that ‘Only one edition will be published’; of course, this was a marketing ploy rather than an estimate of the book’s success, and this children’s literary classic has never been out of print.

The Library holds copies of both issues of the first edition of The Magic Pudding, together with the original sketches — mostly black and white, with a small number of watercolours.

‘The truth is,’ Lindsay confided to his publisher in October 1918, ‘I’m not at all proud at having produced this little bundle of piffle.’ Thankfully Lindsay’s opinion of his book did not resonate with generations of Australian readers, who continue to enjoy it 100 years on.

Sarah Morley
Curator, Research and Discovery

To celebrate The Magic Pudding’s centenary, in October 1918, a selection of Norman Lindsay’s original drawings and manuscripts will be shown in the Amaze Gallery, and a display featuring reproductions of original illustrations is on from 29 September 2018 to 24 February 2019.

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