

Strachey (1880–1932) insisted that he only sought to tell the truth about his subjects and claimed to have done a great deal of research. In reality, Altick says, he relied heavily on the “standard” biographies, and used them “with great license, selecting and tampering with the data to conform to his fixed idea of his subject and going so far as to suppress contrary evidence and falsify quotations.”

Nevertheless, Strachey’s “boldly innovative book” made a big splash, Altick says. It ushered in “the jazz age biography,” fizzing with colorful personal details, imagined scenes, purported psychological insights derived from letters or thin air, and illusive intimacy, as when one biographer of Matthew Arnold called that exponent of high seriousness ‘Matt’ from cradle to grave.” *Eminent Victorians* and the hundreds of imitations that followed touched off a debate about biography that continues to this day. It is a debate over what balance must be struck between what the biographer owes to the memory of the subject and the subject’s survivors and his duty to his readers, over the balance between the recital of fact and artistic effect.

Yet *Eminent Victorians*

When Max Beerbohm did this 1929 caricature of Lytton Strachey, he called him “The Prince of Prose-Writers.”



itself has not worn well. “As a literary work,” Altick says, “it is almost unreadable, except as a curiosity. One is struck not by Strachey’s once admired urbanity and elegance but by his pose as a middle-aged enfant terrible, his obsession with meretricious effects, and his astonishing predilection for clichés.”

More important, Altick writes, the stereotype that Strachey so firmly attached to the Victorians—that they were “stupid . . . parochial, philistine, complacent, prudish” people—has been largely overturned by scholars (although traces of it still persist, even among them). The very fact that a decade ago, former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher could invoke “Victorian values” as a remedy for current woes showed “how radically the image of the Victorians has been altered.” Today, Altick concludes, it is *Eminent Victorians*, not Victorian civilization, that stands discredited.

Getting Real in Children’s Literature

“Reading for Profit and Pleasure: *Little Women* and *The Story of a Bad Boy*” by Ellen Butler Donovan, in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (Dec. 1994), Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, Journals Division, 2715 N. Charles St., Baltimore, Md. 21218–4319.

Generations of young people have enjoyed the adventures of the March sisters in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868–69). But readers today may not realize how much of a radical departure in children’s literature this classic—along with its lesser-known contemporary, Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s *The Story of a Bad Boy*—represented. The two books, contends Donovan, of Middle Tennessee State University, were the first for children to offer more-realistic characters and a world not tightly controlled by adults.

Before *Little Women* and *Bad Boy* (first published in serial form in 1869), children’s fiction aimed mainly to teach moral or religious lessons, Donovan says. The child characters served as examples of either good or bad behavior, and adult paragons of virtue were in-

variably on hand to guide or correct the one-dimensional children.

Drawing on their own experiences, Alcott and Aldrich created more-natural characters. Each of the March girls has her own individual traits: Jo is short-tempered, Meg longs to be fashionable, Amy is vain, and Beth is bashful. In *Bad Boy*, Aldrich went even further, Donovan notes. Tom Bailey, the title character, "manages to involve himself in all sorts of scrapes," and even spends time in jail.

Both authors gave adults only minimal roles in the novels, and these elders were not automatically invested with absolute moral authority. Unlike the ideal parent portrayed in the typical children's literature of the day, the March mother, Marmee, is not "all wise, all knowing, and all good." Instead, she makes mistakes, admits them to her daughters, and at one point even apologizes to Meg for making a "very unwise" decision. Marmee is "just an older, more experienced version of the girls," Donovan points out. In Aldrich's *Bad Boy*, the adult Sailor Ben even serves as Tom Bailey's accomplice.

Although *Little Women* and *The Story of a Bad Boy* marked a fundamental literary change, both novels were immediately snapped up by the book-buying public and remained popular throughout the 1870s. These groundbreaking works had appeal in a time when adolescence was increasingly being recognized as a stage between childhood and adulthood. *Little Women* has retained its popularity to the present day, and

A Poet of the Sea

In the *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Winter 1995), poet Richard Tillinghast of the University of Michigan recalls the elemental force of Robert Lowell (1917–77) and his poetry.

My parents were driving me from Memphis to Cambridge in 1962 to begin graduate school. I was reading Life Studies for the first time. The angst, the vulnerability, the exposed nerves of the author of that often harrowing book led me to expect someone other than the man I was about to meet.

Physically Robert Lowell gave an impression of force, with strong shoulders and an unusually large head—not a head that revealed the skull and hinted at the brain as with his mentor Allen Tate: one, rather, that gave a powerful but awkward, elemental impression, making one think simultaneously of a bull and a creature of the sea. Though he had been a footballer at St. Mark's and at Kenyon, where he played varsity tackle, fishing was in later life the one sport he found meaning in. He was born under the constellation Pisces.

Water was his element. I can think of no other poet who has evoked the sea so often and so tellingly. Fish, gulls, whales, turtles, seals appear again and again in his work. The dolphin of his later work was both muse and self:

*Any clear thing that blinds us with surprise,
your wandering silences and bright trouvailles,
dolphin let loose to catch the flashing fish. . . .*

"These lines—with their unlikely rhyme, surprise/trouvailles, which itself surprises—speak to the restlessness, the search for novelty, the need for reinventing himself periodically which characterize Lowell's entire career. It was this impulse which led him to invent the personal style of Life Studies—"the biggest change in myself [my italics] perhaps I ever made or will." The sea for Lowell was an eternal present, an emblem of the life force as he saw it, brutal and destructive: "The ocean, grinding stones," he wrote in "Near the Ocean," "can only speak the present tense; / nothing will age, nothing will last. . . ."

has inspired three film adaptations (the latest last year). Aldrich's novel and its young protagonist, Tom Bailey, however, long since have faded into obscurity. Perhaps young readers found Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn more to their liking.