Fat Books, Coloured Pencils, Nibs and Ink: Juvenile Journals for the Classroom

Juliet McMaster
University Professor Emerita, University of Alberta

If we take juvenilia seriously as a body of literature worth studying, then it follows that it's a body of literature worth teaching. But youthful works are not just one genre: kids write fiction, polemics, poetry, drama, journals. And, as we do with literature by adults, we may find it convenient, for the purposes of teaching, to concentrate on one genre at a time. Within that large body of writings, the childhood journal is eminently worthy to provide matter for a specialised course—say an honours tutorial, or a senior course in genres.[1]

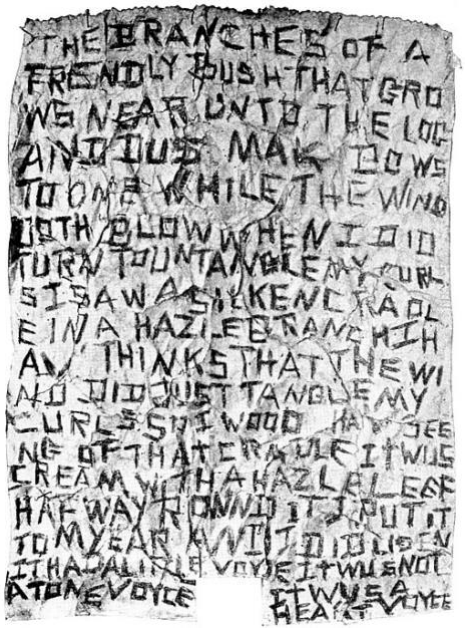

Figure 1. A specimen page of Opal's diary written on a paper bag (Opal Whiteley, Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons*).*

Journal of Juvenilia Studies 7.1 (2025), pp. 71–79. DOI:10.29173/jjs91

Why should access to a child's subjectivity be only in the hands of pediatric psychologists and the like, when we have first-hand accounts by children themselves? Youthful journals can be a fascinating study, for cultural, historical, or psychological purposes, as well as literary ones. For instance, how much has the world learned, not only about one child, but a major phase of world history, from the diary of Anne Frank? Anne Frank hasn't needed the Juvenilia Press to bring her famous diary into the limelight. But the Press has published a number of childhood journals of more and less historical significance and literary merit, and these would certainly form a strong basis for a course on the youthful journal. The choice of approach would naturally depend on the context of the course, and the instructor's preferences. A literary study might focus on youthful style. These journals are typically written from the self to the self; so the style is apt to be refreshingly direct and intimate. A psychological approach might focus on the child/parent relation, or on family dynamics. Iris Vaughan and Opal Whiteley, for instance—both elder sisters—take their responsibility in caring for younger siblings very seriously. A focus of my own is on the child's eye view of what Jane Austen called "real solemn history" (*Northanger Abbey*, ch. 14)—which in this context may not be as real or solemn as usual.

Materials

KIDS CAN'T always go out and purchase their own writing materials—paper, pens, ink, and especially a blank book to write in. Writing starts with materials, and materiality looms large in youthful journals. The relation of writer to page is an intimate one. Anne Frank addresses her diary in the second person, and names it "dear Kitty."

"I'll begin from the moment I got you [she writes]: the moment I saw you lying on the table among my other birthday presents" (1). She has just turned thirteen. Iris Vaughan, writing in South Africa at the time of the Boer War, begins her journal at seven (and she can't yet spell "diary," though she takes three shots at it!). "Pop … gave me this fat book. It was a government book, but it is mine now. I shall write here in the loft, and hide my book in the box with straw where no one can see it" (1). The blank book to write in, or some equivalent, is a *sine qua non* of composition for a child of this period. It is almost as though the blank book sucks the child's narrative onto its inviting pages.

Pop's project in giving Iris the blank book is to funnel off the brutally honest responses she is unable to quell in speech, and it works. Since Pop is a magistrate, she is familiar with the oath about delivering "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth": and when she tells Mr. Ogilvie that she is *not* his "sweethart … so help me God becos you are such an ugly old man with hair on your face" (2), Pop considers it is time to provide her with a place to unload the whole truth. Hence the government book.

Opal Whiteley, the seven-year-old daughter of a family working in the logging camps of Oregon in the early nineteen-hundreds, has no access to blank books and not much to pens (Fig. 1). She writes, in capitals only and with no spaces between the words, on such scraps of throw-away wrappings from butcher and baker as she can lay her hands on. She uses coloured pencils, given her, she believes, by the "fairies"—though with the mediation of "the man that wears grey neckties and is kind to mice" (as she always calls him) (*Peter Paul Rubens* 10).[2] When she discovers the delivery, she writes, "I did have joy feels all over. The color pencils, they were come. There was a blue one, and a green one, and a yellow one and a purple one, and a brown one, and a red one. I did look very long looks at them a long time" (12–13). It seems the fairies' gift provides a magical power. When it came to publishing the diary in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the coloured pencils proved a boon, since Opal kept using the one colour until it was finished; so the multitudinous scraps of paper could be assembled in some order.[3] Her intense and poetic outpourings, despite the paucity of her materials, suggest that her inspiration is almost compulsive.

Parents are often the suppliers of the crucial blank book. Hope Hook, sailing from England and crossing Canada in 1905, has a sleek black booklet that matches ones also given to her brothers; clearly the parents were supplying their children with an activity to keep them occupied during the long, sedentary journeys by ship and rail and boat. And when we were editing Hope's diary, we were able to borrow illustrations of beetles from the journals of her artistically talented brothers. (They were all keen entomologists.) These diaries were not on-going, but of the kind devoted to a single life episode. Hope ends her diary, "At 5.45 on Friday 16th August 1907 we reached Silverbeck [their home], thus ending both our journey and this journal" (41). Perhaps it came with a sign of relief!

Why Write a Diary?

SOME YOUNG diarists ask themselves that question. Anne Frank admits, "It seems to me that later on neither I nor anyone else will be interested in the musings of a thirteen-year-old girl." She was wrong there!—her diary has gone through many translations, editions, and reprintings. But she declares, "Oh, well. It doesn't matter. I feel like writing …" (6). And write she did, recording her Jewish family's long experience, hiding from the Gestapo in the now famous Annex in Amsterdam.

Dick Doyle, at fifteen, is of two minds about starting a diary: "WEDNESDAY. The first of January [1840] …. Made good resolutions and didn't keep them. … First thought I would, then thought I would not, was sure I would, was positive I would not, at last determined I would, write a journal. Began it. This is it" (Doyle I, 1). He did go on with it, and illustrated it too, with dozens of highly inventive drawings that soon led to his successful years as an illustrator for *Punch*, and as the designer of its famous cover that lasted for over a century (Fig. 2).

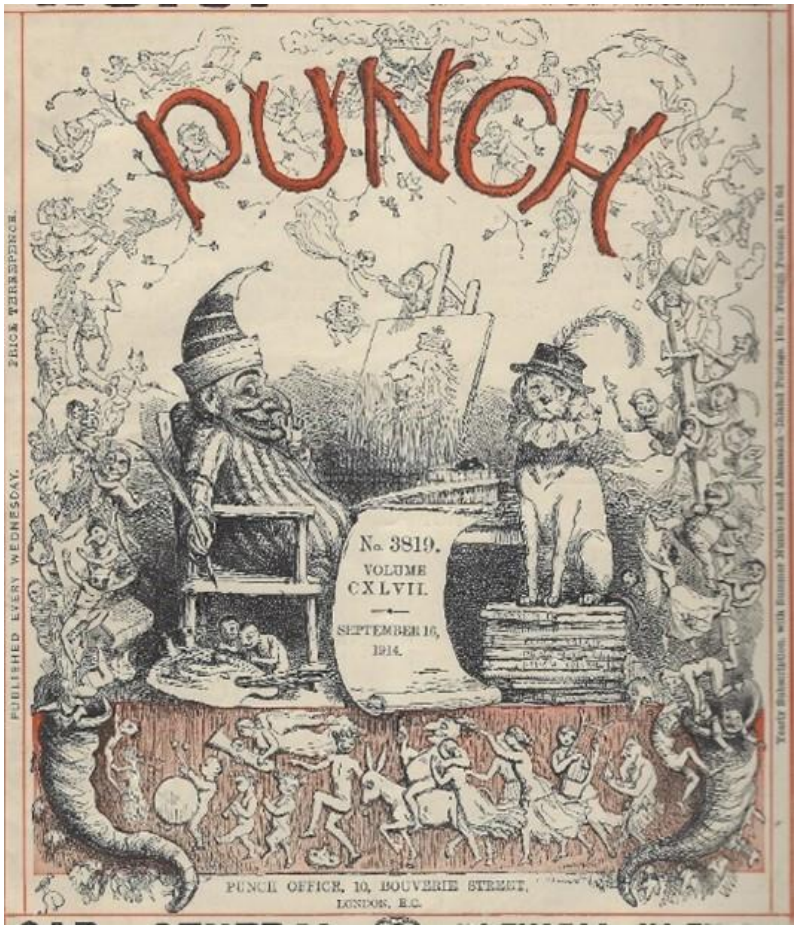

Figure 2. Punch *cover from 1848, by Richard Doyle, slightly revised from the version of 1844. (Cover image by Rowland McMaster.)*

Marjory Fleming, in Scotland, was only eight when she died of measles in 1811; but she nevertheless makes it into the *Dictionary of National Biography*, where the editor himself, Leslie Stephen, wrote her entry. She wrote her amazing combination of journal, history, verse, and moral comment as part of her education by her cousin, Isabella Keith, who was also her governess. And the signs of pedagogy are still there in the manuscript as preserved in facsimile, spelling corrections and all. This prolific child wrote a history of Scotland in verse, and a biography of Mary Queen of Scots, also in verse, as well as records of her ongoing reading of—for instance—Swift, Thompson, Gray, and the *Mysteries of Udolpho* (Radcliffe). Not bad for an eight-year-old!

Of course there are many motives for writing a journal, but Anne Frank's cheerful "I feel like writing" is probably the basic motive for most of these young authors. Little Opal Whiteley, an abused child who has much to complain of, is once sent in disgrace to lie under the bed (Fig. 3). Her mother then forgets about her:

> Now I hear the mamma say, "I wonder where Opal is." She has forgets. I'm still under the bed where she did put me quite a time ago. And all this nice long time light has come to here from the lamp on the kitchen table—light enough so I can print prints. ["Printing" is her word for writing.] I am happy. (*Peter Paul Rubens* 28)

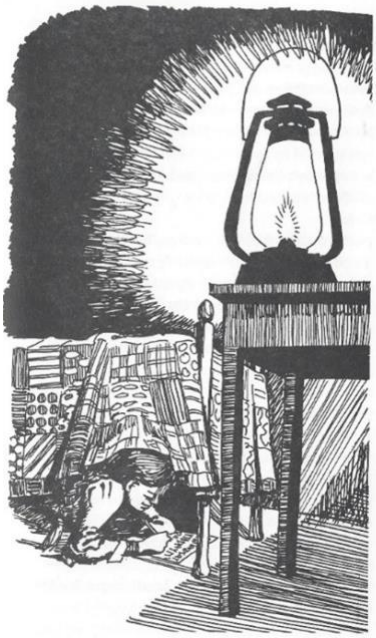

Figure 3. "… light enough so I can print prints. I am happy." Illustration by Juliet McMaster of Peter Paul Rubens and Other Friendly Folk *by Opal Whiteley, p. 27.*

Light enough to write by suffices for happiness for this young diarist.

Why Read and Teach Childhood Journals?

OF COURSE it is worth reading and studying youthful journals for many of the same reasons that we read and study famous adult journals—that of Samuel Pepys, for instance—to find the individual's close-up experience, in a past era that otherwise we glimpse only in the long view of history. Anne Frank's record of the years her Jewish family spent in hiding brings us close to a salient part of Second World War history.

Sometimes the child's eye view provides an enjoyable new take on solemn adult-related history. Iris Vaughan wrote some of her diary during the Boer War. Her account of the raid of the Boers on the premises of the stolid British Magistrate "Pop" disperses the self-importance of some adult accounts. The Boers are ragged and bearded, and inefficiently in search of money and horses. The children watch from

the fence, but scatter as a Boer with a gun and "a band of bullets rond his chest" comes to question them. There is a degree of slapstick as the girls scurry to hide in the closet, and Charles "lay flat in the manger" (29):

> The Boer saw Charles and said "Where is your horse we know you have a horse. Charles said I dont know. We all knew Pop had locked it up in the feemale cell in the jail. Pop said if Naughty holds his mouth and you all hold yours they wont find him. We all shut our mouths. (29)

Naughty, safe in the female jail cell, escapes discovery, and the Boers depart empty-handed. The next day—too late—the British army arrives, all spit and polish, while Pop is digging in the garden:

> The Majer didn't think he was a magistrar and shouted at him, "Hoist the flag, hoist the flag" … and Pop was in a bad temper becos it was hot … and he stood up and looked at the Majer with a savige look and said "Bloody well hoist it yourself. Up one day and down the next … if you would move faster it might stay up longer." (31)

Not the British Empire's finest hour!

As a teenager with his finger on the pulse of literary and artistic Victorian London,[4] Dick Doyle is reading the serial novels of Dickens, Harrison Ainsworth, and Charles Lever as the numbers emerge, and commenting on them as well as on the daily events recorded in the *Observer*. He brings history home in engaging ways. He watches military reviews presided over by the Duke of Wellington on "his little fat bay horse" (II, 9). He sees the wedding procession of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and notes, "The Queen with a large veil over her head, looked actually beautiful" (I, 27). Doyle's early haunting of public spaces served him well in his career. For *Punch* he could knock off recognizable caricatures of figures like the Duke, Prince Albert, Peele, and Disraeli.

The child diarist can look inward as well as outward. And it is intriguing to follow the young writer's self-examination. Anne Frank investigates herself anatomically as well as morally, and doesn't shy away from matters like menstruation and sexuality. Marjory Fleming, usually proud of her many accomplishments, castigates herself for losing her temper with her ever-patient cousin: "I am going to tell you that in all my life I never behaved so ill for when Isa bid me go out of the room I would not go & when Isa came to the room I threw my book at her in a dreadful passion & she did not lick me but said go into the room & pray & I did it I will never do it again" (39).

These young writers are often developing professionally as well as morally. Some of them, not surprisingly, are planning to be authors. Opal Whiteley declares, "When I grow up, I am going to write for children, and grownups who haven't grown up too

much [adults, take note!] all the earth-songs I now do hear" (14). Subsequently she did write about her extraordinary insights into nature, though the teenage writings don't live up to her early childhood diary. Anne Frank, too, planned to be a writer, we hear: "Unless you write yourself, you can't know how wonderful it is. … I want to be useful or bring enjoyment to all people, even those I have never met. I want to go on living even after my death!" (Frank, 249–50). And Anne Frank has indeed gone on living after her pathetically early death in Bergen-Belsen, at the hands of the Nazis.

Iris Vaughan in South Africa, too, has her writing ambitions. She means to be a journalist. And she and her equally young friend Violet proceed to found their own newspaper: "Pop gave us lots of foolscap and nibs and ink [those indispensable materials!]. Violet will write the stories and I will write the news. … We sell it at sixpence each. It is hard work doing so much writing. … We work on Friday night when Pop and Mom go to parties" (120–21). And Iris did indeed become a journalist, though she never wrote anything as popular as her youthful diary became.

Figure 4. Dick Doyle's drawing of himself admiring his prints for sale. His dream is realized. Reproduced from Dick Doyle's Journal *(Juvenilia Press, 2006), p. 7).*

Artists too can write journals, and record their ambitions. Dick Doyle, from a large family of aspiring artists, at fifteen already launches on professional endeavours. "I am working away at the Tournament like I don't know what," he reports (I, 11), of his series of satirical drawings of the "mediaeval" tournament staged by the Earl of Eglinton in 1839. Dick allows himself to dream of seeing his *Tournament*, printed

and published, on display in the window of Fores, the famous print shop. "Oh crikey," he writes, "it would be enough to turn me inside out" (Doyle I, 7). He has his professional ups and downs. He gets the *Tournament* printed, and joyfully gloats over his neat stack of fifty copies. Then—horrors!—comes the printer's bill of £4 – 18s, which he can't pay; and he imagines himself hauled off by the Peelers. And finally—yes, he does see his *Tournament* actually on display for sale at Fores' print shop (Fig. 4). His dream is realized!

Elizabeth Thompson (later Lady Butler), a talented young painter, is inspired by a visit to the field of Waterloo to specialize in battle scenes. As a woman artist, especially one choosing subject matter usually considered a male preserve, she faces many challenges. Hers is something of a Cinderella story: she encounters one obstacle of exclusion after another; and then records a triumph with her painting *The Roll Call* at the 1873 exhibition of the Royal Academy. The art establishment and even the Prince of Wales shower her work with praise; their speeches are published; and she becomes famous overnight. Nevertheless, though later she was actually nominated for election to the Royal Academy, that hallowed institution couldn't bring itself to elect a woman to its ranks until the twentieth century.[5] There were some battles even this brave and brilliant woman couldn't win.

It is enlightening to watch these fledging young authors struggle to take wing. When Butler, as a well-established painter in her seventies, wrote her *Autobiography*, she knew professional beginnings are important; and she incorporated parts of her early journal. "Let the young Diary speak," she wrote.

Yes, and let us listen!

These fat books and blank-volume birthday gifts, coloured pencils, "foolscap, pens and ink," in these young hands, can become not only indispensable tools, but sources of inspiration.

NOTES

[1] In an honours tutorial I taught before I retired, the three students and I co-edited an edition of Daisy Ashford's *The Young Visiters* for the Juvenilia Press.

[2] I quote from the Juvenilia Press edition of selections from the diary, since our edition is readily available; the full diary first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August 1920 as *The Story of Opal: The Journal of an Understanding Heart*. A more recent edition is by Benjamin Hoff, *The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow*.

[3] I have argued that Opal Whiteley's account of her beloved pig influenced E. B. White when he wrote *Charlotte's Web*. See "White's Wilbur and Whiteley's Peter Paul Rubens."

[4] I have written on this subject in "*Dick Doyle's Journal*: a Teenager at Home and at Work in 1840 Victorian London."

[5] Two women, Angelica Kauffmann and Mary Moser, were among the original 40 Academicians appointed at the founding of the Royal Academy in 1769. But no other women were elected during the whole of the nineteenth century.

WORKS CITED

Butler, Elizabeth (Thompson). *Autobiography*. 1922. Fischer Press, 1993.

Doyle, Richard. *Dick Doyle's Journal*. Edited by Juliet McMaster and others. 3 vols. Juvenilia Press, 2006, 2008, 2009.

Fleming, Marjory. *The Journals and Poems of Marjory Fleming*. Edited by Leslie Robertson, Juliet McMaster, and others. Juvenilia Press, 2018.

Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl*: Definitive edition. Edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, translated by Susan Massotty. Doubleday, 1991.

Hoff, Benjamin, editor. *The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow. The Mystical Nature Diary of Opal Whiteley*. By Opal Whiteley. Penguin, 1994.

Hook, Hope. *Crossing Canada, 1907*. Edited by Juliet McMaster and others. Juvenilia Press, 2011.

McMaster, Juliet. "*Dick Doyle's Journal*: A Teenager at Work and at Home in 1840 London." *Home and Away: The Place of the Child Writer*. Edited by David Owen and Lesley Peterson. Cambridge Scholars Press, 2016, pp. 43–67.

———. "White's Wilbur and Whiteley's Peter Paul Rubens." *Journal of Juvenilia Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2019. Pp. 46–54.

Thompson, Elizabeth (Butler). *Waterloo Diary: Woman Battle Artist in Training*. Edited by Juliet McMaster and others. Juvenilia Press, 2015. Nominated for the William P. Burger Prize in British Art History.

Vaughan, Iris. *The Diary of Iris Vaughan*. Edited by Peter Alexander and Peter Midgley. Juvenilia Press, 2010.

Whiteley, Opal. *Peter Paul Rubens and Other Friendly Folk*. Edited by Laura Cappello, JulietMcMaster, Lesley Peterson, and Chris Wangler, Juvenilia Press, 2001. Selections from *The Story of Opal*, below.

———. *The Story of Opal, the Journal of an Understanding Heart*. *Atlantic Monthly,* March-August, 1920.