

Narrative Instability and the Role of Captions in Hugh Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle* Newspaper Serial Illustrations¹

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I. Overview

America-based English writer Hugh Lofting's most famous literary creation, Doctor John Dolittle, was first introduced to the American reading public in *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, published by Frederick A. Stokes, in the autumn of 1920. An instant success, widely and enthusiastically reviewed, it featured a kindly middle-aged man, somewhat Poirot-esque in stature, who possessed the ability to converse with animals in their own languages, and with great natural empathy. In 1922, a UK edition was released, the same year that Lofting's second offering, *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* was also published. Although perennially popular with each succeeding generation, captivated by the amazing adventures of the doctor and his cryptozoological menagerie, since the 1970s the Dolittle books have, nevertheless, felt the impact of 'postist' discourses that flooded (and largely informed) the Academy, especially postcolonial literary studies. As a result, in 1988 the first two Dolittle books (*The Story*, *The Voyages*) were controversially expunged of their racially derogatory language and allusions, in editions designed to mark the centenary of Lofting's birth. Before these modern editorial changes, many schools had removed the Dolittle books from recommended reading lists following a broadside attack on them by New York librarian Isabelle Suhl, who famously wrote, 'the "real" Doctor Dolittle is in essence the personification of The Great White Father Nobly Bearing the White Man's Burden', suggesting that, 'his creator was a white racist and chauvinist, guilty of almost every prejudice known to modern white Western man.'² It is therefore with a considerable dose of irony, that winding back the clock almost fifty years, we find Annie Moore of the venerable New York Public Library lauding the stories and quoting an enthusiastic mother in her review of *The Story*: 'the best thing

about it [the book] is that it is full of the feelings I want my children to have, put into such *nice language*’ [original emphasis].³ Somewhat curiously, given the adventure trope running throughout the Dolittle books, and especially in a period when ‘appropriate reading’ fell along strict gender lines, *The Story* appeared as number 14 on a list of ‘100 Best Books for Girls’,⁴ compiled by Clara Whitehill Hunt, Superintendent of the Children’s Department, Brooklyn Public Library; while it was left out entirely of the corresponding list for boys produced by Franklin K. Mathiews, Chief Scout Librarian. Putting aside this omission, in the review press generally and readership at large, there was consensus that the book’s sentiments and lively and decorous language were healthy and wholesome, so much so that Annie Moore’s review for Randolph Hearst’s *New York Herald*, suggested that after scarcely three months in the public sphere, the activity of reading the book had become so popular that it had attained the status of a verb, with whole families ‘dolittling’.⁵

Given the mixed fortunes of the Dolittle books — their immense popularity on the one hand, yet controversial content on the other — it is unsurprising that they have featured heavily in wider debates concerning the ethics of making textual changes to modern editions of literary ‘classics’: non-authorial interventions that range from word-replacement to complete omissions, and even include plot changes. These are activities that for some amount to the sanitization of classic literature, while for others they represent necessary changes to reflect contemporary values. The debate is especially acute in the case of children’s literature because of fears that young children lack the mental capacity, life experience, and maturity to place such works in their appropriate historical, cultural, and social contexts. One unfortunate result of this preoccupation is that scant notice has been taken of contemporary newspaper serializations of the Dolittle stories that attempted to capitalize on the commercial success of the books. Although the serialization largely maintained close textual fidelity to the original books, reusing many of Lofting’s iconic monochromatic illustrations, these illustrations were often re-captioned and appeared in different positions in the text. Taken as a whole, such changes represent significant non-authorial textual interventions, altering narrative positionality, and undoubtedly affecting reader reception of the stories.

While modern debates rage around editorial treatment of language and

sentiments that the passage of time has made uncomfortable to us, in recognizing that the process of serialising the Dolittle books produced compromises, adjustments, and narrative repositioning, especially in the recaptioning of pictures, further light may be shed on how the books were understood by contemporary readers. The meaningfulness of analysing recaptioned pictures is magnified when the work under consideration involves author-illustrators, because there is a direct imaginative congruence between text and image that is inevitably not present when they are produced by separate individuals. Children's literature has spawned a number of important examples with whom Lofting was often compared in advertising and review material, most obviously Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* series (from 1901), but less well remembered, Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902), and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Perhaps it is that children have greater tolerance for the naïve, simple line forms produced by these untrained author-illustrators, because they come closer to mirroring their own level of visual representation. It is also likely that leaving more room for the readers' imaginations to work, is better suited to fantastical stories which tend to transgress geographical and temporal norms.

II. **Serialization of *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* and *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle***

On 29 October 1922, *The New York Tribune* began its serialization of *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* and *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* in the Magazine Section (Part VI) of their Sunday paper, produced under the collective title, *The Adventures of Doctor Dolittle*. The serialization was announced in a large advertisement carried the day before, which made extensive use of puns associated with the title character's medical credentials. Readers were advised to 'Consult Doctor Dolittle in Next Sunday's Tribune',⁶ and that Doctor Dolittle's 'prescription of fun and kindness' would be supplied in weekly doses (Fig. 1). Importantly, for the focus of this paper, the advertisement referred to the story being 'most originally illustrated'. The serialization also featured a prominent illustrated header by Lofting (Fig. 2), in which the full Dolittle menagerie appeared, most notably the famous two-headed 'Pushmi-Pullyu', bearing a striking resemblance to the recently discovered Okapi.⁷ The presence of the



Fig. 1. Advertisement for serialization, *New York Tribune*, 28 October 1922.



Fig. 2. Header by Hugh Lofting for the *New York Tribune's* serialization of the first and second books in the 'Doctor Dolittle' series, 29 October 1922.

header seems to indicate not only Lofting's approval of the serialization, but also his close creative involvement with it.

Despite some notable exceptions, in this period serial fiction — fiction written to be serialized — or near-simultaneous publication in book and serial form, was by far the most common industry formula. Newspapers used serial

fiction as a way of ‘hooking’ readers in a highly competitive and saturated market place, while book publishers used full serializations, abridgements, and extracts as a form of testing the market, advertising forthcoming releases, and to reach new reading demographics. The serialization of the Dolittle stories was therefore rather atypical, coming almost two years after the publication of the first book. However, it did coincide with the issue of the second Dolittle book. There is also the strong possibility that it would provide the proven reader appeal that the *New York Tribune* required for its revamped ‘Magazine Section’, which became a separately numbered section (Section VI) on the 27 May 1922 in half-page format. Copyright was initially held jointly by the author and Frederick A. Stokes and Co., but by the third issue (12 November, 1922) copyright of the serialization was held exclusively by the New York Tribune Inc. Textually, there were significant re-arrangements, such as the combining of several chapters, and some abridgement, but changes can largely be accounted for when consideration is given to column formatting. Hugh Walpole’s ‘Introduction’ that appeared from the tenth printing onwards was absent, and a synopsis of the preceding parts of the story was included to help readers re-orientate themselves, something of an interpretive intermediary between text and reader.

III. Illustrations⁸

Additions and omissions

In addition to the small textual changes, several illustrations that did not appear in the book-form stories were included in the serialization, and there were some omissions too.⁹ The relative stability of the text, can therefore be contrasted with the instability of the illustrations and their captioning. While it has not been possible to ascertain whether the additional illustrations used in the serialization were unused left-overs from the initial book publication of 1920, or newly commissioned, the presence of the illustrated header suggests that Hugh Lofting was actively illustrating at this period, indicating that the latter scenario is the most likely. Figures 3–5 show three good examples of illustrations appearing in the serialization that did not previously appear in the book editions. Figure 3, shows the moment the King of the Jolliginki realizes



Fig. 3. Additional illustration in the *NYT*'s serialization (12 Nov 1922).

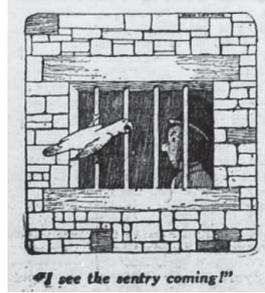


Fig. 4. Additional illustration in the *NYT*'s serialization (10 Dec 1922).

he has been tricked by Doctor Dolittle's parrot, Polynesia, allowing the Doctor to escape his imprisonment. The illustration appears centrally placed underneath the illustrated title, straddling two columns of the third part of the serialization (corresponding to Chapter 9: 'The Bridge of Apes' in the US book edition). Figure 4, appearing in the *New York Tribune* issued on the 10 December 1922, shows Dolittle's second imprisonment, and illustrates part of a conversation between Doctor Dolittle and Polynesia featured in, though not containing the exact exchange, Chapter 12: 'Medicine and Magic' of the US book version. This chapter contains the most racist and objectionable material of all the Dolittle chapters in *The Story*, in which Prince Bumpo, influenced by reading fairytales of white knights and fair maidens, desires to make himself more 'attractive' by turning himself white. The prince's obsession with whiteness is used by Dolittle to escape from prison for the second time, by concocting a treatment that (temporarily) turns the Prince's face white. The underlying attitudes in which whiteness and beauty are equated was a fairly common trope in American newspapers of this period. For example, Grace Drayton's comic strip 'Dolly Dimples' which appeared in the *New York Tribune*'s comic section featured a storyline in which toddler Dimples attempts to turn her African-American friend white using her mother's powder in order to make her 'bewful' (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. Prince Bumpo's face whitening. *New York Tribune* (10 December, 1922).

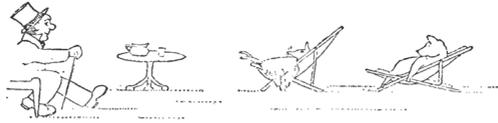


Fig. 6. Comic strip, 'Dimples' by Grace Drayton, *New York Tribune* (c1920)

Figure 5, another illustration unique to the serialization of the 10 December 1922, features the moment Prince Bumpo immerses his face in Dolittle's face-whitening concoction. As a consequence, his face turns as 'white as snow', and his eyes, formerly 'mud-colored, are now a "manly gray"'. While the storyline and vast majority of the text is identical to the book version, the inclusion of the image is undoubtedly more shocking.

Captioning: the removal of direct quotations

The inclusion of different illustrated moments of the Dolittle adventures helps to fill imaginative voids, but they do not generally alter the fundamental storyline or narrative positioning. In the vast majority of cases, all of the illustrations in Lofting's first two books were captioned with direct quotations from the text, a policy that cleverly brought the characters and animals to life, amplifying key plot points in a manner reminiscent of picture books. The use of the writer's own words *verbatim* means the captions sustain the direct relationship between text and image. However, in the *New York Tribune's* serialization, many of the illustrations were re-captioned in the third person, creating a further layer of description which positioned the illustrations as a commentary on the text rather than being integral to it. Thus, the umbilical connection between text and image that was Lofting's hallmark is severed. Take for



“They used to sit in chairs on the lawn”



Dr. Dolittle and two of his convalescent patients in the garden

Fig. 7. The impact of direct quotation (*The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, 11th printing 1923, p. 19) and third person description (*The New York Tribune*, 5 Nov 1922) in the captioning of illustrations.

example, the illustration of Dolittle with some animal patients convalescing on his lawn. The book version captioned this, “They used to sit in chairs on the lawn”, a verbatim extraction from the text, whereby the *New York Tribune’s* serialization describes the scene as though by an external narrator, in effect silencing both Dolittle’s, and by extension, Lofting’s voice. One explanation for this shift from direct speech to third person narration is that the columnar format of the serialization, combined with the fixed location of the main illustration as a central cartouche straddling two columns, made it more difficult for readers to locate the corresponding passage in the text. This editorial remedy implies a sophisticated understanding of the effect of format on reader experience, and introduces a voice that is no-longer Lofting’s.

Complicating matters further, illustration captions were sometimes changed completely, often subtly transforming the way the image could be interpreted, but on occasion, drastically changing the agency within the images. In figure 8, the left-hand image from the book form depicts Dab-Dab the duck flying towards a white mouse floating in Dolittle’s top hat, the scarcely visible mouse is explaining why he is in the hat, “I got into it because I did not want to be drowned”. However, in the *New York Tribune’s* version,

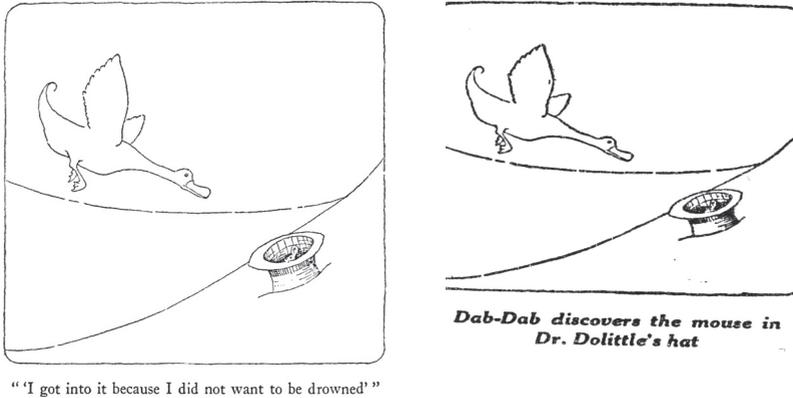
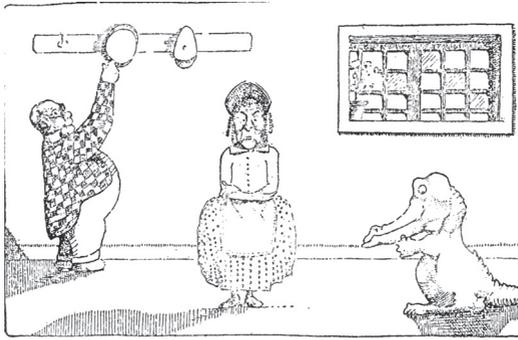


Fig. 8. Showing switch of narrative positioning created by different captions: *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, 11th printing, 1923 (left), *The New York Tribune*, 12 November 1922 (right).

the same image is captioned, ‘Dab-Dab discovers the mouse in Dr. Dolittle’s hat’. Here, it is Dab-Dab’s activity that is being described, and not the mouse’s explanation. In other words, the subject is Dab-Dab’s hunt for the mouse, the scene more generic, less anchored to a specific moment in time.

Another good example of the interpretive shift that is created by the *New York Tribune’s* re-captioning of some of the illustrations is the depiction of the argument between Doctor Dolittle and his sister, Sarah, concerning his keeping a crocodile in the house. In the image, his rather embittered sister is seen standing motionless with arms crossed in a posture of defiance and determination. In the serialized form, the scene supposedly captures the moment immediately after she has ejaculated crossly, “I don’t care what you call it” and “It’s a nasty thing to find under your bed. I won’t have it in the house” (Fig. 9b). However, in the original book form, the same image purportedly depicts the moment Doctor Dolittle responds to her second threat, “I’ll go and get married then” (Fig. 9a). The same illustration, but imbued with two very different meanings. The latter seems to account for the Doctor reaching for his hat with the indifference explained by the dialogue, the latter the sour face and crossed arms of his sister having delivered an ultimatum.



“All right,’ said the Doctor, ‘go and get married’ ”

Fig. 9 (a). Illustration no. 23 from *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, Frederick A. Stokes Company: New York, 11th Printing (1923) p. 23. Image courtesy of The Internet Archive.

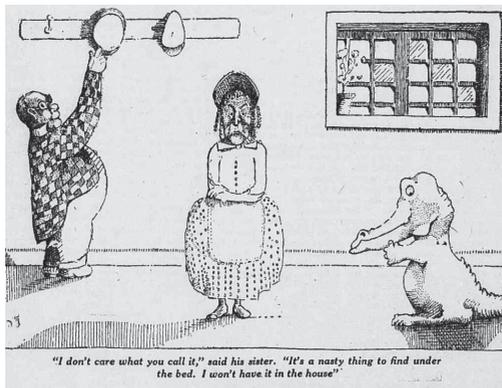


Fig. 9 (b). Illustration from first part of ‘The Adventures of Doctor Dolittle’, *The New York Tribune*, 29 Oct 1922, vi. 5.

IV. Conclusion

The simplistic monochromatic illustrations created by Hugh Lofting were much admired by contemporary readers. However, their simplicity is deceptive when the mediating function of their captions is considered. Through

analysis of the illustrations of the *New York Tribune's* serialization of the first two Dr. Dolittle books, it has been demonstrated that in responding to format constraints wrought by a single-page multi-columnar format, the illustrations could be subject to re-interpretation. The shift from direct quotations to descriptive captions resulted in the illustrations being more generic, depicting plot sequences rather than specific moments. In some cases, the re-captioning dramatically transformed how the scene was to be understood by readers. When the addition of new illustrations is also considered, it serves to highlight how the process of adapting books to serial a format in newspapers and magazines is just as complicated, if not more complicated, than moving mediums in the other direction. Comparison of all contemporaneous US and UK editions with the entire *New York Tribune* serialization has not yet been possible, but it seems likely that when this has been accomplished, further interesting insight into the relationship between text and image will be gained.

Notes

1 A shorter version of this paper, 'Capricious Captioning and Narrative Instability: Hugh Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle* Newspaper Illustrations', was presented as part of the exhibition, 'Novelists & Newspapers: The Golden Age of Newspaper Fiction, 1900–1939', curated by P. Robinson, Komaba Museum, Tokyo (10 June 2017).

2 Cited by Selma G. Lanes, 'Children's Books; Doctor Dolittle, Innocent Again', *New York Times* (28 August 1988). Perhaps only the work of Enid Blyton has played a more prominent role in the debate over the redacting and altering of 'classic' texts.

3 Moore, A. C., 'The Rarest Animal of All', *The New York Herald* (12 December 1920), VII, p. 7. *Chronicling America* database. Accessed 17/8/2018.

4 Hunt, C. W., '100 Best Books for Girls', *The New York Herald* (12 November 1922), VIII, p. 3. *Chronicling America* database. Accessed 17/8/2018.

5 Moore, *op cit.*

6 *New York Tribune*, 28 October 1922. The wording perhaps suggests that the advertisement should have appeared a week earlier, but was for some reason delayed.

7 It is likely that the Pushmi-Pullyu is based on the African giraffid artiodactyl mammal, the Okapi, which until scientific description by zoologist Philip Lutley Sclater in 1901, had been the subject of folklore.

8 It has not, unfortunately, been possible to consult all parts of the Doctor Dolittle serialization. The Library of Congress' digital archive *Chronicling America*, only holds copies up to the 31 December 1922, and The Shadowlands Newspaper Archive, 9

September 1923–24 February 1924.

9 It should be noted that although the publisher listed new printings (rather than editions), the text remained static, but new illustrations were sometimes added. For example, between the tenth and fourteenth printings a frontispiece was added, and two further full-page plates titled, 'At night she carried a tiny lantern' (facing page 38), and 'So he struck a match' (facing page 142), sadly lacking in the Harvard copy consulted via Internet Archive. Accessed 31/3/2017.