

The Secret Garden Book Project

The SECRET GARDEN



festival theatre
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INTRODUCING *THE SECRET GARDEN* AUTHOR

Frances Hodgson Burnett

Early Years

Frances Hodgson Burnett was born on 24 November 1849 in Cheetham Hill, Manchester. Her mother, Eliza Boond, came from a well-respected family and her father, Edwin Hodgson, ran a successful business selling decorative goods to upper-class homes. The third child of five, Frances and her family lived in relative luxury with a maid, a nurse-maid, and a horse and carriage. However, when Frances was just four years old the comfortable, secure life came to an end following the death of her father. Eliza took over the running of the business and Frances was looked after by her grandmother, who introduced her to reading and provided her with her very first book.



Francis Hodgson Burnett

Despite an erratic education, by the time she was seven Frances had begun writing her own stories. With a shortage of writing materials she developed a quick and verbal way of telling stories that had her friends and family entertained.

Move to America

After a recent spell of prosperity, the American Civil War had begun to have a negative effect on Manchester's trade and industry. Having already sold off the family home, Eliza was forced to make several downward moves to more industrial working class areas. Frances was unfazed by the change in circumstances and fascinated by the miners and factory workers she now lived amongst with their strong Lancashire accents. In 1865, Eliza was eventually forced to sell the business and shortly afterwards moved her children to America to join her brother William Boond, who ran a dry goods (clothing and toiletries) business, in Knoxville, Tennessee.

All About the Author

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Having made the three-week crossing from Liverpool, England to Quebec, Canada, followed by a two-week train journey, Eliza and her children eventually arrived at a log cabin nearly 25 miles outside of Knoxville that was to be their home for the first winter. Although far removed from their once prosperous English household, the lush and beautiful mountainous landscape appealed to Frances' love of the outdoors and nature, and she found the people friendly. Having moved closer to Knoxville in 1866, Frances soon struck up a friendship with her neighbour Swan Burnett. Swan was a quiet, studious young man who had been left crippled from a childhood accident. Although a little intimidated by her, Swan immediately fell for Frances with her chatty manner and talent for storytelling and she in turn felt overwhelming sympathy for his physical disabilities and enjoyed introducing him to her favourite English novelists.

After the war William Boond lost much of his business and was no longer able to provide for his newly arrived family. In order to assist financially, Frances drew on her creative talents and natural love of storytelling, and started writing to earn money for the family. Her first stories, *Miss Carruthers' Engagement* and *Hearts and Diamonds*, were published in *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1868 for a staggering \$35 (equivalent to £1,400 in today's money). By the age of 18 she had started to write five or six stories each month for the popular ladies' magazines and by 1869 she had earned enough to move her family into Knoxville. In 1870 Eliza passed away and Frances, as the oldest daughter, assumed an even greater financial responsibility for the family.

Married Life

In September 1873, following a trip back to England, Frances married Swan Burnett, now a doctor, and within a year she gave birth to their first child, Lionel. As Tennessee grew too small for Frances' growing ambitions, the family moved to Paris in 1875 where she supported Swan through his specialist medical training and where their second child, Vivian, was born in April 1876. It was during this time that Frances wrote and published her first full length novel, *That Lass o'Lowries*, a story about a pit girl in a Lancashire coal mine who falls in love with the middle-class mine manager. The book was unanimously praised by the critics in Britain and America. In 1877 the family returned to America and settled in Washington DC where Swan opened an eye and ear surgery and Frances found herself at the centre of the city's literati.

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Fame

Frances had the first of many stories published in children's magazine *St Nicholas* in 1879. Over the next five years she continued to receive positive reviews for these and her adult tales but it was not until her best-selling novel *Little Lord Fauntleroy* in 1886 that her reputation was set. Basing the central character Cedric on her own son Vivian, the book became a best-seller in the United States and England, earning Frances more than \$100,000 (equivalent to over 5 million in today's money), was translated into 21 different languages and prompted thousands of mothers to dress their poor sons in velvet suits and wide-brimmed hats just like the hero described in Frances' book. *Little Lord Fauntleroy* was very much the *Harry Potter* of its day and secured her reputation not only as a writer but also later as a playwright.



Francis' son Vivian dressed as Little Lord Fauntleroy

Dismayed to find that her novel had been dramatised in London without her permission, Frances fought and won a lawsuit against the playwright, setting a new precedent for all similar cases. Authors could now stop playwrights from making plays of their books without permission. Frances' play *The Real Lord Fauntleroy* opened in May 1888 to rave reviews, attended by Prince Edward and his wife, and went on to make her as much money as the book. This was the start of a new strand to her career that saw her adapt and produce stage versions of many of her novels.

Frances was now an international celebrity with everything she and her family did reported in the newspapers – not always favourably. Unfortunately the pressures of her fame and her career led Frances to suffer from various illnesses and she turned to Spiritualism, Theology and Christian Science for guidance and comfort – themes that would occur in her later fiction. Over the next few years Frances would travel extensively for work and pleasure, back and forth between England and America, and throughout Europe. It was during one of these extended trips that Frances, herself suffering from illness and depression, learned that her eldest son Lionel had been diagnosed with tuberculosis. She returned to his bedside but Lionel died in 1890 and Frances was overcome with grief.

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Although in mourning and refusing requests for interviews, reporters continued to write about her, criticising her trips abroad, her marriage, her son Vivian, her books, and linking her name romantically with many of her male friends.

Back to England

With increasing career pressures and extended periods of separation, Frances and Swan's marriage began to fall apart. In 1898, after 25 years of marriage, and when her younger son Vivian finished Harvard University, Frances divorced Swan Burnett and moved permanently to her country property in England - Great Maytham Hall. The property had a large garden where she was able to indulge her love for flowers and found inspiration for several more books, including *The Secret Garden*. In 1900 she married Stephen Townsend, an English actor more than ten years younger than her, whom she had helped nurture as a young performer and who in later years had come to look after her business affairs. However, the marriage was not a happy one, with Frances later claiming she had been blackmailed into the union, and they separated in 1902 amid rumours of abuse and bullying.

Frances lived for the last 17 years of her life in Plandome, Long Island and continued to write throughout this time publishing titles such as *The Secret Garden* (1911) and *The Lost Prince* (1914). Few could have predicted the enduring success of *The Secret Garden* when it first came out, dismissed by some critics as over sentimental and by others as merely a "pretty tale". Frances died at the age of 74 on October 29, 1924 and was buried in Roslyn Cemetery, Nassau County, New York State.

Legacy

Nearly one hundred years have passed since Frances wrote *The Secret Garden*, and the effect of that book on its readers only grows with time. As a novel, a film, and a play – surprisingly one of her books that she never thought of dramatising – it continues to move readers and viewers all over the world, and her work has been translated into almost every language. In English, it is consistently cited as one of the most influential books upon generations of readers. In this era of increased opportunities for women, we would do well to remember what tremendous will, devotion, and imagination it took for a woman of her era and talent to achieve this legacy.