Was Enid Blyton the mother from hell?

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One daughter says she was a fair and loving mother, but the other claims she was arrogant and 'without a trace of maternal instinct'. On Mother's Day, 80 years after Enid Blyton's first book was published, Gyles Brandreth talks to both of them.

'ENID BLYTON? She was a wonderful mother." "Enid Blyton? She wasn't a mother at all." I am talking to the daughters of Enid Blyton, the world's most prolific children's author (700 titles: 400 million copies sold, in 42 languages, around the globe) whose first book, Child Whispers, was published 80 years ago.

I am meeting Miss Blyton's daughters - her only children - separately, because to meet them together would not be possible. Once upon a time, when they were little girls, and their mother was the J. K. Rowling of her day, they were photographed together constantly, playing in the sandpit, laughing on the lawn, curled up together at their mother's knee. These days, the sisters neither see nor speak to one another. Independently, but in the same words, they tell me, "It's easier this way."

Gillian Baverstock, the older daughter, is 70 now, a widow, mother and grandmother, living in a fine house on the edge of Ilkley Moor, with her 12-year-old golden retriever, Bruce, surrounded by a mass of Blyton memorabilia. After lunch (served with a delicious Rioja), she puts my coffee on Enid Blyton's side table: "Yes," she says, proudly, "the very table at which she created The Famous Five."

Gillian has a deep, warm voice and speaks in formal sentences, with wonderful diction and appropriate emphasis. She has all the characteristics of an old-fashioned primary school teacher, which, of course, is what she has been.

She says, "My mother gave me the belief that whatever talents you have, you must use them. I didn't have the imagination or skill to write as she did, but I may have inherited some of her gifts as a teacher. She could communicate with children in a quite remarkable way, and not just on the page. She was a fair and loving mother, and a fascinating companion."

Imogen Smallwood, Gillian's only sibling, now 66, tells a different story. She, too, is a widow, mother and grandmother, who has taught and worked with young children, but if Gillian is an archetypal cosy granny in the apple-cheeked Blyton tradition, Imogen is more a Roald Dahl creation.

She is taller, slimmer, spikier, more contemporary in manner, more metropolitan in attitude. (I am sorry that she declines to be photographed because she is rather beautiful and looks much younger than her years.) She lives in an airy flat in Clapham, south

London, has an MA in psychotherapy and works as a counsellor for the mental health charity MIND.

Imogen, too, has her share of Blyton bric-a-brac (notably the original drawings of Noddy, Big Ears and their friends from Toyland) and admiration for her mother's achievement. "What Blyton did as a writer was brilliant," she says crisply, "even if she didn't fulfil her potential and, towards the end, began to repeat herself. But as a person, as a parent, she was far from brilliant.'

Imogen serves me homemade scones, with cream and strawberry jam (my idea of an Enid Blyton tea) and tells me, quite calmly, that whatever Gillian might say for public consumption, "the truth is Enid Blyton was arrogant, insecure, pretentious, very skilled at putting difficult or unpleasant things out of her mind, and without a trace of maternal instinct. As a child, I viewed her as a rather strict authority. As an adult, I did not hate her. I pitied her."

Where Blyton's daughters are in agreement is that Enid disliked - perhaps even despised - her own mother.

Enid Mary Blyton was born on August 11, 1897, in a small flat above a shop in East Dulwich. Her father, Thomas Blyton, was a cutlery salesman from Sheffield, with intellectual ambition and a knowledgeable love of music and nature.

Enid adored him. "He knew more about flowers, birds and wild animals," she once said, "than anyone I ever met." She recalled the walks they took together when she was a little girl: "These were the happiest times, when looking back it seems the days were always warm and sunny and the skies were deeply blue."

Enid's mother, Theresa, was a more prosaic sort: tall, raven-haired, good-looking, but limited in her vision, deeply conventional, obsessively house-proud. She did not share her husband's interests or aspirations. It wasn't long before he left her for another woman.

This was Edwardian England. Theresa would not consider the humiliation of divorce: she told anyone who asked that her husband was simply "away on business", and insisted that Enid and her two younger brothers support her in the lie.

Enid, without the father she adored, and with a mother for whom she felt no sympathy, turned in upon herself and began to live in her own internal world. She started to write. In 1916, aged 19, she moved to Ipswich to train as a teacher. For the next four years, she had no contact with her family. Her mother told friends and neighbours that her daughter had joined the Women's Land Army.

As a young woman, Enid saw her father occasionally, at his office in London (he had a further three children with his mistress, including another daughter who became the new apple of his eye), and her mother as rarely as possible. She attended neither of their funerals.

Whatever clouds hung over her family life, the sun shone on her writing career from the start. In 1925 her first books, and her stories and poems for educational magazines, earned her £1,200 - about £22,000 in today's money, and a taste of things to come. (In 1996 the family sold their interest in the Blyton literary estate for £14 million. The Blyton daughters are not motivated by money; they live comfortably, but without ostentation. Their share of the fortune appears to have gone in trust to their children and to a range of worthy causes.)

In 1924, at Bromley Register Office, with none of her family present, Enid married Hugh Pollock, DSO, a soldier-turned-publisher, a divorcee eight years her senior. She gave up teaching, concentrated on her writing (using two fingers, with her typewriter perched on her knees, she could produce 6,000 words a day), and hoped to start a family.

It was not easy. In 1928, when she was 31, she consulted a gynaecologist, who told her she had an unusually under-developed uterus, "almost that of a young girl of 12 or 13." (Gillian and Imogen both believe that this may have been a by-product of the trauma of her parents' separation when Enid was 13.) Hormone injections were prescribed and, whether or not they were effective, Gillian was conceived and born in August 1931.

"By then," Gillian tells me, "my parents had moved to Bourne End, in Buckinghamshire, to a fairytale cottage called Old Thatch, with a lychgate and a lovely garden. We stayed there until I was seven. For me these were idyllic years." Her eyes are glistening as she tells the story. "I remember the hens, turkeys, ducks, fantail pigeons, doves, the tortoise, the Siamese cats, the fox terriers.

"I was a 1930s child, of course. I had a nanny. You went down to see your parents at five o'clock, but my mother always seemed to have time for me. We would go to glorious buttercup meadows. We would go blackberrying. I would come and garden with her. I was always doing things with her. Always."

Gillian concedes that Imogen, born in 1935, was less fortunate. "I was the first child. I think my father would have liked his second child with Enid to have been a boy. And, as Imogen was growing up, my mother's career was taking off. We moved to a larger house, Green Hedges, at Beaconsfield, where there were more staff to maintain, the upkeep was greater, and my mother worked harder than ever."

Imogen remembers the nursery at Green Hedges: "It was directly over my mother's lounge, where she did her writing. There was a big round lamp, like a dish, hanging from the ceiling, and bumps or bangs from the nursery above rattled it alarmingly.

"Any screams that I emitted when my sister tickled or teased me were easily audible downstairs. Most of my mother's visits to the nursery were hasty, angry ones, rather than benevolent. The nursery was a lonely place. The nannies lingered in the warm kitchen and I had no friends to come and play with me.'

To both children their mother appeared busy, well-organised, contented. At the time neither realised that their father was suffering from a breakdown and drinking to excess. (The family's chauffeur-gardener discreetly disposed of the empty bottles.)

During the late-1930s Enid developed a close friendship with Dorothy Richards, one of the nurses who had been engaged to help at the time of Imogen's birth. Gillian dismisses the idea that Enid and Dorothy had a lesbian relationship as "complete nonsense". Imogen says: "Homosexuality? I don't know. Let it just hover in the air."

What is clear is that by the early 1940s, both Enid and Hugh were seeking solace in conventional extra-marital relationships. In July 1941, Hugh left home. Gillian says, "I remember going down to the station with him, just before my 10th birthday. And I remember leaving the station with tears in my eyes. I never saw him again.

"Years later, I learnt that he had heard about my wedding, read about it in the papers, and came to the church, secretly, and stood across the road and watched over me on my wedding day."

Why, when she was an adult, did Gillian not try to get in touch with her father? "My mother would not have wanted it. I thought of naming my first son after him, but I realised it would have hurt my mother, so I didn't. Once she had died, I did try to find him. He was living in Malta with his new wife and daughter, but I was too late to see him. He died two weeks after I found out where he was."

Predictably, Imogen's verdict on her father is starker: "My poor unhappy father. No, I did not love him very much."

Hugh Pollock moved out of Green Hedges, never to be spoken or heard of again, and Kenneth Darrell Waters moved in. He was a successful surgeon, aged 51, when he married Enid Blyton in October 1943. She was 46.

Gillian says: "He was very deaf, which made life difficult for him, but he was very nice to me. He tried to make me feel good about myself. He would dance with me. He made me feel I looked fine, which was a kindness."

Imogen says: "He was deaf, foul-tempered, lousy socially . . . He was so possessive, he was like a clamp on my mother."

Both Gillian and Imogen had nannies, both were sent away to boarding school, and while, as a consequence, neither wanted nannies or boarding schools for their own children, it is only Imogen who recalls her childhood with anguish.

The bleakest moment seems to have been the time when she came back from school to discover that the nanny she had expected to find at home had been replaced by somebody new. She made a scene. "The new nanny left the same day on the grounds that I was impossible.

"I learned of her departure lying in bed that night. My stepfather suddenly came in and turned on the light. He said that I was wicked and ungrateful and a terrible nuisance to my mother. If the words were cruel, the anger that exploded from him was terrifying. But he did not touch me. He never hit me, however angry he was . . .

"As I lay in bed after he had gone back downstairs, no doubt to tell my mother that he had done a good job, I slowly and grimly came to terms with the fact that I would never again be able to talk about myself, about my worries, problems and joys.

"Like so many other children in similar situations, I began to build a wall round my inner self so that I could never be hurt in that way again."

Even now, nearly 60 years on, there is something guarded about Imogen. She has been wounded in her life and the scars show. I do not sense self-pity or chippiness, but the pain is evident and she makes no effort to hide it.

Gillian has known hurt, too. Her eldest son died, aged 22, following a car accident. Her husband never recovered from the experience; I sense her other children have had their travails, too. But Gillian's philosophy of life (encouraged by her faith: she still teaches at Sunday school) requires her to regard the half-empty glass as always half-full.

Imogen says the sisters no longer see one another because "I don't think we have anything in common." I imagine somewhere along the line there was also a definite falling out. Even as little girls, the pair seem to have been jealous of one another. Imogen says that Gillian had a nicer doll (one that could drink and wet itself) than she had. Gillian says that while she had to wait until she was 10 before she could eat with her mother in the evening, Imogen was accorded that privilege (and many others) at an earlier age.

It is impossible to know which of the girls is giving the more accurate account of life with Enid Blyton. Imogen says, "There is a popular myth that my mother read frequently to my sister and myself, trying out her stories on us. This is quite untrue." She does remember her mother taking her to the dentist, to the library at the back of Boots, to Debenhams to get her school uniform, but "when I needed her she wasn't there".

Gillian portrays a working mother with considerable responsibilities who nevertheless made time for her children. "I remember when Imogen was sick over her golliwog, mother spent hours cleaning him up with her eau de Cologne."

As a small child, Imogen read her mother's books but found they did not satisfy her. "I was looking for something more," she says. Can she explain her mother's phenomenal popularity as a children's author? "Yes," she says, looking at me with wide, sad eyes.

"She wrote as a child with an adult's writing skills. She saw everything in black and white. She was emotionally immature. She could love the children who were her readers. It was only her own children who failed to capture her love."

Gillian shakes her head. "My mother loved Imogen very much. She was so lovely as a child, pretty, elfin and intelligent."

Gillian is not blind to her mother's weaknesses ("She was repressed because of her own upbringing, and I do remember terrible rows at home: my mother and stepfather were two very strong-willed people"), nor to the failings in her own family (when I say to her, "A mother's place is in the wrong", she laughs a deep, throaty laugh), but she prefers to celebrate the good than anatomise the bad. I think Imogen would see that as perpetuating a life-lie. I say to Imogen, "It's as if you want to punish people with the truth."

She smiles. "Yes," she says, "I am a great punisher with the truth. I remember one of the last times I saw my mother, she was quite frail, and she told me my stepfather was in the garden. I said to her, `No, mother, Kenneth isn't in the garden. He is dead.' "

Kenneth died in 1967. Enid Blyton died a year later, in 1968, aged 71. For the last decade of her life she suffered from what was then called pre-senile dementia. "It came on her slowly," says Gillian, "but towards the end it was very sad. One day she told me she had written a new Noddy story. She had simply scrawled a few lines. It was double-dutch."

Enid Blyton was the best-selling children's author of the 20th century. She invented characters that have stood the test of time. She told adventure stories that have delighted several generations. (She is still in the top ten of authors borrowed from British libraries.) In The Faraway Tree she created a magic world that, for my money, puts her up there with J. M. Barrie and A. A. Milne. There was always sunshine in her world and, of course, her speciality was make-believe.

In The Story of My Life (1952) she wrote of her family: "We all have a sense of humour. We are all (thank goodness!) good-tempered. Nobody sulks, nobody complains, nobody is unkind. But that, of course, is largely a matter of upbringing. Spoilt children are selfish, complaining and often conceited. But whose fault is that? It is the mother, always the mother, that makes the home. She is the centre of it.

"She should always be there to welcome the children home, to see them and listen to them. I was lucky to have a gift that could be used at home. I could not have left my husband or my children and gone out into the world to make my career. All true mothers will know what I mean when I say that . . ."

Imogen continued to see her mother throughout her life. Why? "I kept going to Green Hedges because I wanted a home. And when my mother was ill, she let her defences down, and I liked her better then." Did the adult Imogen ever remember her mother on Mothering Sunday? "No, she wasn't a mother. I never sent her anything. I wouldn't expect it from my own children."

Imogen married in 1967. Her husband died of cancer only five years later. Her daughter, now 30, has had problems with her health; her son, now 32, lives in Australia with his

wife and children. "My husband's death did my son a lot of damage," she says, simply. "Yes, there is a pattern in this family. It's always the father disappearing . . ."

Courteously (both the Blyton girls have perfect manners), Imogen asks after my parents. I tell her my father died some years ago, aged 71, but that, happily, my mother is still going strong, 88 next birthday.

"And do you love your mother?" she asks.

I tell her the truth: "I love her very much."

"Well," she says, looking at me steadily, "you have been fortunate, Gyles. You have had a warmth in your life that I have not known. It is a warmth that never disappears. Count your blessings."