Excerpts from

PETER PAN

by J. M. Barrie

J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan is well known as a children's novel. To the adult reader, though, it has much to teach about the movement of a life from childhood to adulthood to parenthood, and about our eventual replacement by our children. By offering a particularly rich account of the distinctive character of childhood, Peter Pan reminds adults of a world no longer accessible to them.

Mr. and Mrs. Darling live at No. 14 with their children, Wendy, John, and Michael, and the children's nurse, Nana, a dog. "There never was a simpler happier family," Barrie tells us, "until the coming of Peter Pan," the magical boy who refuses to grow up.

The first of the two excerpts below describes Peter's appearance at No. 14. Before he arrives, though, Mrs. Darling finds a portent that he will come in her children's minds, which she "tidies up" at night while they sleep. A child's mind, Barrie tells us, is an island, called the Neverland, where Peter lives (with the "lost boys," who are there because they have no mothers).

After Peter's arrival, in a part of the story not reproduced here, he teaches the children to fly and takes them away with him to the Neverland, leaving their parents bereft. In the Neverland, Wendy acts as his mother, and plans to become his wife.

The second excerpt consists of the concluding pages of the book. The children have returned and Mr. and Mrs. Darling have adopted the lost boys. Peter, though, refuses to be adopted. Instead, he goes back to the Neverland, arranging to return for Wendy once each year. But Peter, who has no sense of time and little memory, forgets to return, and Wendy and the boys grow up.

After a long while Peter does return, and finds Wendy an adult with a daughter of her own. When he sees what has become of her he feels fear and pain, emotions almost unknown to him. He recovers, though, when he discovers that Wendy's daughter can now take her mother's place. She—and also her daughters after her—fly away to the Neverland and become the keepers of his stories.

What is the Neverland? Why are there no parents there? What is the meaning of Mrs. Darling's effort to "tidy up" her children's minds? Can she, or any...
mother, succeed? Should she even try?

Peter's arrival terrifies Mrs. Darling. Why do adults fear the approach of the Neverland, though children do not? Are adults right to fear it?

Why has Peter no sense of time, and so little memory? What effect does this have on his character? Why is he afraid when he sees Wendy fully grown?

Can all children fly? Is it true that only children can fly? Is childhood necessarily age-specific?

Excerpt 1

Mrs. Darling first heard of Peter when she was tidying up her children's minds. It is the nightly custom of every good mother after her children are asleep to rummage in their minds and put things straight for next morning, repacking into their proper places the many articles that have wandered during the day. If you could keep awake (but of course you can't) you would see your own mother doing this, and you would find it very interesting to watch her. It is quite like tidying up drawers. You would see her on her knees, I expect, lingering humorously over some of your contents, wondering where on earth you had picked this thing up, making discoveries sweet and not so sweet, pressing this to her cheek as if it were as nice as a kitten, and hurriedly stowing that out of sight.

When you wake in the morning, the naughtiness and evil passions with which you went to bed have been folded up small and placed at the bottom of your mind; and on the top, beautifully aired, are spread out your prettier thoughts, ready for you to put on.

I don't know whether you have ever seen a map of a person's mind. Doctors sometimes draw maps of other parts of you, and your own map can become intensely interesting, but catch them trying to draw a map of a child's mind, which is not only confused, but keeps going round all the time. There are zigzag lines on it, just like your temperature on a card, and these are probably roads in the island; for the Neverland is always more or less an island, with astonishing splashes of colour here and there, and coral reefs and rakish-looking craft in the offing, and savages and lonely lairs, and gnomes who are mostly tailors, and caves through which a river runs, and princes with six elder brothers, and a hut fast going to decay, and one very small old lady with a hooked nose. It would be an easy map if that were all; but there is also first day at school, religion, fathers, the round pond, needlework, murders, hangings, verbs that take the dative, chocolate pudding day, getting into braces, say ninety-nine, three-pence for pulling out your tooth yourself, and so on; and either these are part of the island or they are another map showing through, and it is all rather confusing, especially as nothing will stand still.

Of course the Neverlands vary a good deal. John's, for instance, had a lagoon with flamingoes flying over it at which John was shooting, while Michael, who was very small, had a flamingo with lagoons flying over it. John lived in a boat turned upside down on the sands, Michael in a wigwam, Wendy in a house of leaves deftly sewn together. John had no friends, Michael had friends at night, Wendy had a pet wolf forsaken by its parents; but on the whole the Neverlands have a family resemblance, and if they stood in a row you could say of them that they have each other's nose, and so forth. On these magic shores children at play are forever beaching their coracles. We too have been there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more.

Of all delectable islands the Neverland is the snuggest and most compact; not large and sprawling, you know, with tedious distance between one adventure and another, but nicely crammed. When you play at it by day with the chairs and table-cloth, it is not in the least alarming, but in the two minutes before you go to sleep it becomes very nearly real. That is why there are night-lights.

Occasionally in her travels through her children's minds Mrs. Darling found things she could not understand, and of these quite the most perplexing was the word Peter. She knew of no Peter, and yet he was here and there in John and Michael's minds, while Wendy's began to be scrawled all over with him. The name stood out in bolder letters than any of the other words, and as Mrs. Darling gazed she felt that it had an oddly cocky appearance.

"Yes, he is rather cocky," Wendy admitted with regret. Her mother had been questioning her.

"But who is he, my pet?"

"He is Peter Pan, you know, mother."

At first Mrs. Darling did not know, but after thinking back into her childhood she just remembered a Peter Pan who was said to live with the fairies. There were odd stories about him; as that when children died he went part of the way with them, so that they should not be frightened. She had believed in him at the time, but now that she was married and full of sense she quite doubted whether there was any such person.

"Besides," she said to Wendy, "he would be grown up by this time."

"Oh no, he isn't grown up," Wendy assured her confidently, "and he
is just my size." She meant that he was her size in both mind and body; she didn't know how she knew it, she just knew it.

Mrs. Darling consulted Mr. Darling, but he smiled pooh-pooh. "Mark my words," he said, "it is some nonsense Nana has been putting into their heads; just the sort of idea a dog would have. Leave it alone, and it will blow over."

But it would not blow over; and soon the troublesome boy gave Mrs. Darling quite a shock.

Children have the strangest adventures without being troubled by them. For instance, they may remember to mention, a week after the event happened, that when they were in the wood they met their dead father and had a game with him. It was in this casual way that Wendy one morning made a disquieting revelation. Some leaves of a tree had been found on the nursery floor, which certainly were not there when the children went to bed, and Mrs. Darling was puzzling over them when Wendy said with a tolerant smile:

"I do believe it is that Peter again!"
"Whatever do you mean, Wendy?"
"It is so naughty of him not to wipe," Wendy said, sighing. She was a tidy child.

She explained in quite a matter-of-fact way that she thought Peter sometimes came to the nursery in the night and sat on the foot of her bed and played on his pipes to her. Unfortunately she never woke, so she didn't know how she knew, she just knew.

"What nonsense you talk, precious. No one can get into the house without knocking."
"I think he comes in by the window," she said.
"My love, it is three floors up."
"Were not the leaves at the foot of the window, mother?"
It was quite true; the leaves had been found very near the window.

Mrs. Darling did not know what to think, for it all seemed so natural to Wendy that you could not dismiss it by saying she had been dreaming.

"My child," the mother cried, "why did you not tell me of this before?"
"I forgot," said Wendy lightly. She was in a hurry to get her breakfast. Oh, surely she must have been dreaming.

But, on the other hand, there were the leaves. Mrs. Darling examined them carefully; they were skeleton leaves, but she was sure they did not come from any tree that grew in England. She crawled about the floor, peering at it with a candle for marks of a strange foot. She rattled the

poker up the chimney and tapped the walls. She let down a tape from the window to the pavement, and it was a sheer drop of thirty feet, without so much as a spout to climb up by.

Certainly Wendy had been dreaming.

But Wendy had not been dreaming, as the very next night showed, the night on which the extraordinary adventures of these children may be said to have begun.

On the night we speak of all the children were once more in bed. It happened to be Nana's evening off, and Mrs. Darling had bathed them and sung to them till one by one they had let go her hand and slid away into the land of sleep.

All were looking so safe and cozy that she smiled at her fears now and sat down tranquilly by the fire to sew.

It was something for Michael, who on his birthday was getting into shirts. The fire was warm, however, and the nursery dimly lit by three night-lights, and presently the sewing lay on Mrs. Darling's lap. Then her head nodded, oh, so gracefully. She was asleep. Look at the four of them, Wendy and Michael over there, John here, and Mrs. Darling by the fire. There should have been a fourth night-light.

While she slept she had a dream. She dreamt that the Neverland had come too near and that a strange boy had broken through from it. He did not alarm her, for she thought she had seen him before in the faces of many women who have no children. Perhaps he is to be found in the faces of some mothers also. But in her dream he had rent the film that obscures the Neverland, and she saw Wendy and John and Michael peeping through the gap.

The dream by itself would have been a trifle, but while she was dreaming the window of the nursery blew open, and a boy did drop on the floor. He was accompanied by a strange light, no bigger than your fist, which darted about the room like a living thing; and I think it must have been this light that wakened Mrs. Darling.

She started up with a cry, and saw the boy, and somehow she knew at once that he was Peter Pan. If you or I or Wendy had been there we should have seen that he was very like Mrs. Darling's kiss. He was a lovely boy, clad in skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out of trees; but the most entrancing thing about him was that he had all his first teeth. When he saw she was a grown-up, he gnashed the little pearls at her.
Excerpt 2

The children have returned from the Neverland with Peter and the lost boys. The lost boys have been adopted by the Darlings, but Peter refuses to be adopted and to grow up to be a man. Instead, he pleads with Wendy to return with him to the Neverland, to live in a little house in the treetops.

“Well, then, come with me to the little house.”

“May I, mummy?”

“Certainly not. I have got you home again, and I mean to keep you.”

“But he does so need a mother.”

“So do you, my love.”

“Oh, all right,” Peter said, as if he had asked her from politeness merely; but Mrs. Darling saw his mouth twitch, and she made this handsome offer: to let Wendy go to him for a week every year to do his spring cleaning. Wendy would have preferred a more permanent arrangement; and it seemed to her that spring would be long in coming; but this promise sent Peter away quite gay again. He had no sense of time, and was so full of adventures that all I have told you about him is only a halfpennyworth of them. I suppose it was because Wendy knew this that her last words to him were these rather plaintive ones:

“You won’t forget me, Peter, will you, before spring-cleaning time comes?”

Of course Peter promised; and then he flew away. He took Mrs. Darling’s kiss with him. The kiss that had been for no one else Peter took quite easily. Funny. But she seemed satisfied.

Of course all the boys went to school; and most of them got into Class III, but Slightly was put first into Class IV and then into Class V. Class I is the top class. Before they had attended school a week they saw what goats they had been not to remain on the island; but it was too late now, and soon they settled down to being as ordinary as you or me or Jenkins minor. It is sad to have to say that the power to fly gradually left them. At first Nana tied their feet to the bed-posts so that they should not fly away in the night; and one of their diversions by day was to pretend to fall off ‘buses; but by and by they ceased to tug at their bonds in bed, and found that they hurt themselves when they let go of the ‘bus. In time they could not even fly after their hats. Want of practice, they called it; but what it really meant was that they no longer believed.

Michael believed longer than the other boys, though they jeered at him; so he was with Wendy when Peter came for her at the end of the first year. She flew away with Peter in the frock she had woven from leaves and berries in the Neverland, and her one fear was that he might notice how short it had become; but he never noticed, he had so much to say about himself.

She had looked forward to thrilling talks with him about old times, but new adventures had crowded the old ones from his mind.

“Who is Captain Hook?” he asked with interest when she spoke of the arch enemy.

“Don’t you remember,” she asked, amazed, “how you killed him and saved all our lives?”

“I forget them after I kill them,” he replied carelessly.

When she expressed a doubtful hope that Tinker Bell would be glad to see her he said, “Who is Tinker Bell?”

“Oh Peter,” she said, shocked; but even when she explained he could not remember.

“There are such a lot of them,” she said. “I expect she is no more.”

I expect he was right, for fairies don’t live long, but they are so little that a short time seems a good while to them.

Wendy was pained too to find that the past year was but as yesterday to Peter; it had seemed such a long year of waiting to her. But he was exactly as fascinating as ever, and they had a lovely spring-cleaning in the little house on the tree tops.

Next year he did not come for her. She waited in a new frock because the old one simply would not meet; but he never came.

“Perhaps he is ill,” Michael said.

“You know he is never ill.”

Michael came close to her and whispered, with a shiver, “Perhaps there is no such person, Wendy!” and then Wendy would have cried if Michael had not been crying.

Peter came next spring cleaning; and the strange thing was that he never knew he had missed a year.

That was the last time the girl Wendy ever saw him. For a little longer she tried for his sake not to have growing pangs; and she felt she was untrue to him when she got a prize for general knowledge. But the years came and went without bringing the careless boy; and when they met again Wendy was a married woman, and Peter was no more to her than a little dust in the box in which she had kept her toys. Wendy was grown up. You need not be sorry for her. She was one of the kind that likes to grow up. In the end she grew up of her own free will a day quicker than other girls.

All the boys were grown up and done for by this time; so it is scarcely
worth while saying anything more about them. You may see the twins and Nibs and Curly any day going to an office, each carrying a little bag and an umbrella. Michael is an engine-driver. Slightly married a lady of title, and so he became a lord. You see that judge in a wig coming out at the iron door? That used to be Tootles. The bearded man who doesn’t know any story to tell his children was once John.

Wendy was married in white with a pink sash. It is strange to think that Peter did not alight in the church and forbid the banns.

Years rolled on again, and Wendy had a daughter. This ought not to be written in ink but in a golden splash.

She was called Jane, and always had an odd inquiring look, as if from the moment she arrived on the mainland she wanted to ask questions. When she was old enough to ask them they were mostly about Peter Pan. She loved to hear of Peter, and Wendy told her all she could remember in the very nursery from which the famous flight had taken place. It was Jane’s nursery now, for her father had bought it at the three per cents. from Wendy’s father, who was no longer fond of stairs. Mrs. Darling was now dead and forgotten.

There were only two beds in the nursery now, Jane’s and her nurse’s; and there was no kennel, for Nana also had passed away. She died of old age, and at the end she had been rather difficult to get on with; being very firmly convinced that no one knew how to look after children except herself.

Once a week Jane’s nurse had her evening off; and then it was Wendy’s part to put Jane to bed. That was the time for stories. It was Jane’s invention to raise the sheet over her mother’s head and her own, thus making a tent, and in the awful darkness to whisper:

“What do we see now?”

“I don’t think I see anything to-night,” says Wendy, with a feeling that if Nana were here she would object to further conversation.

“Yes, you do,” says Jane, “you see when you were a little girl.”

“That is a long time ago, sweetheart,” says Wendy. “Ah me, how time flies!”

“Does it fly,” asks the artful child, “the way you flew when you were a little girl?”

“The way I flew! Do you know, Jane, I sometimes wonder whether I ever did really fly.”

“Yes, you did.”

“The dear old days when I could fly!”

“Why can’t you fly now, mother?”

“Because I am grown up, dearest. When people grow up they forget the way.”

“Why do they forget the way?”

“Because they are no longer gay and innocent and heartless. It is only the gay and innocent and heartless who can fly.”

“What is gay and innocent and heartless? I do wish I was gay and innocent and heartless.”

Or perhaps Wendy admits that she does see something.

“I do believe,” she says, “that it is this nursery.”

“I do believe it is,” says Jane. “Go on.”

They are now embarked on the great adventure of the night when Peter flew in looking for his shadow.

“The foolish fellow,” says Wendy, “tried to stick it on with soap, and when he could not he cried, and that woke me, and I sewed it on for him.”

“You have missed a bit,” interrupts Jane, who now knows the story better than her mother. “When you saw him sitting on the floor crying, what did you say?”

“I sat up in bed and I said, ‘Boy, why are you crying?’”

“Yes, that was it,” says Jane, with a big breath.

“And then he flew us all away to the Neverland and the fairies and the pirates and the redskins and the mermaids’ lagoon, and the home under the ground, and the little house.”

“Yes! which did you like best of all?”

“I think I liked the home under the ground best of all.”

“Yes, I do I. What was the last thing Peter ever said to you?”

“The last thing he ever said to me was, ‘Just always be waiting for me, and then some night you will hear me crowing.’”

“Yes.”

“But, alas, he forgot all about me.” Wendy said it with a smile. She was as grown up as that.

“What did his crow sound like?” Jane asked one evening.

“It was like this,” Wendy said, trying to imitate Peter’s crow.

“No, it wasn’t,” Jane said gravely, “it was like this;” and she did it ever so much better than her mother.

Wendy was a little startled. “My darling, how can you know?”

“I often hear it when I am sleeping,” Jane said.

“Ah yes, many girls hear it when they are sleeping, but I was the only one who heard it awake.”

“Lucky you,” said Jane.

And then one night came the tragedy. It was the spring of the year, and the story had been told for the night, and Jane was now asleep in her
bed. Wendy was sitting on the floor, very close to the fire, so as to see to
damn, for there was no other light in the nursery; and while she sat dam-
ing she heard a crow. Then the window blew open as of old, and Peter
dropped on the floor.
He was exactly the same as ever, and Wendy saw at once that he still
had all his first teeth.
He was a little boy, and she was grown up. She huddled by the fire not
daring to move, helpless and guilty, a big woman.
"Hullo, Wendy," he said, not noticing any difference, for he was think-
ing chiefly of himself; and in the dim light her white dress might have
been the nightgown in which he had seen her first.
"Hullo, Peter," she replied faintly, squeezing herself as small as possi-
ble. Something inside her was crying "Woman, woman, let go of me."
"Hullo, where is John?" he asked, suddenly missing the third bed.
"John is not here now," she gasped.
"Is Michael asleep?" he asked, with a careless glance at Jane.
"Yes," she answered; and now she felt that she was untrue to Jane as
well as to Peter.
"That is not Michael," she said quickly, lest a judgment should fall on
her.
Peter looked. "Hullo, is it a new one?"
"Yes."
"Boy or girl?"
"Girl."
Now surely he would understand; but not a bit of it.
"Peter," she said, faltering, "are you expecting me to fly away with
you?"
"Of course; that is why I have come." He added a little sternly, "Have
you forgotten that this is spring-cleaning time?"
She knew it was useless to say that he had let many spring-cleaning
times pass.
"I can't come," she said apologetically, "I have forgotten how to fly."
"I'll soon teach you again."
"O Peter, don't waste the fairy dust on me."
She had risen; and now at last a fear assailed him. "What is it?" he
cried, shrinking.
"I will turn up the light," she said, "and then you can see for yourself."
For almost the only time in his life that I know of, Peter was afraid.
"Don't turn up the light," he cried.
She let her hands play in the hair of the tragic boy. She was not a
little girl heart-broken about him; she was a grown woman smiling at it
all, but they were wet smiles.
Then she turned up the light, and Peter saw. He gave a cry of pain;
and when the tall beautiful creature stooped to lift him in her arms he
drew back sharply.
"What is it?" he cried again.
She had to tell him.
"I am old, Peter. I am ever so much more than twenty. I grew up long
ago."
"You promised not to!"
"I couldn't help it. I am a married woman, Peter."
"No, you're not."
"Yes, and the little girl in the bed is my baby."
"No, she's not."
But he supposed she was; and he took a step towards the sleeping
child with his dagger upraised. Of course he did not strike. He sat down
on the floor instead and sobbed; and Wendy did not know how to com-
fort him, though she could have done it so easily once. She was only a
woman now, and she ran out of the room to try to think.
Peter continued to cry, and soon his sobs woke Jane. She sat up in
bed, and was interested at once.
"Boy," she said, "why are you crying?"
Peter rose and bowed to her, and she bowed to him from the bed.
"Hullo," he said.
"Hullo," said Jane.
"My name is Peter Pan," he told her.
"Yes, I know."
"I came back for my mother," he explained, "to take her to the Ne-
everland."
"Yes, I know," Jane said, "I have been waiting for you."
When Wendy returned diffidently she found Peter sitting on the bed-
post crowing gloriously, while Jane in her nighty was flying round the
room in solemn ecstasy.
"She is my mother," Peter explained; and Jane descended and stood
by his side, with the look on her face that he liked to see on ladies when
they gazed at him.
"He does so need a mother," Jane said.
"Yes, I know," Wendy admitted rather forlornly; "no one knows it so
well as I."
"Good-bye," said Peter to Wendy; and he rose in the air, and the
shapeless Jane rose with him; it was already her easiest way of moving
about.
Wendy rushed to the window.

“No, no,” she cried.

“It is just for spring-cleaning time,” Jane said; “he wants me always to do his spring cleaning.”

“If only I could go with you,” Wendy sighed.

“You see you can’t fly,” said Jane.

Of course in the end Wendy let them fly away together.

Our last glimpse of her shows her at the window, watching them receding into the sky until they were as small as stars.

As you look at Wendy you may see her hair becoming white, and her figure little again, for all this happened long ago. Jane is now a common grown-up, with a daughter called Margaret; and every spring-cleaning time, except when he forgets, Peter comes for Margaret and takes her to the Neverland, where she tells him stories about himself, to which he listens eagerly. When Margaret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter’s mother in turn; and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless.