

# Children Under Siege in the Digital Age

In [\*The Princess and the Goblin\*](#), George MacDonald casts both an unlikely hero and an unlikely weapon to defeat the enemy. In what is almost unimaginable in today's culture, the hero is a twelve-year-old boy, and his weapon is *verse*. When the goblins threaten to attack, only a chant or rhyme can defeat these villains. The hero, then, must possess a nubile mind capable of overpowering a hoard of foes with an appropriately rhymed meter, and Curdie fits the bill:

The chief defence against [the goblins] was verse, for they hated verse of every kind, and some kinds they could not endure at all. I suspect they could not make any themselves, and that was why they disliked it so much.[\[1\]](#)

The character of MacDonald's rhyme-wielding hero should raise the question: What would a twelve-year-old male exiting childhood and entering young manhood look like in our twenty-first-century world? More specifically, would a modern-day Curdie have any resources to call upon in his repeated encounters with the goblins, if he had the misfortune of being raised in a culturally mainstream family? Sadly, our zeitgeist would collide with and crush Curdie's powerful arsenal of weaponry: a deep well of imagination undergirded by a sense of responsibility and honor. Let us look at several aspects of our cultural milieu that would render Curdie a near impossibility:

**First, the absence of time for wandering and wondering in God's creation.** Twenty-first-century Curdie, no doubt, would forsake his many hours alone wandering in the woods. The natural environment would be replaced with mandatory desk-sitting in an artificial and stifling indoor environment, with the added punishment of digital images assaulting his senses

at every turn. This is the great irony: Forced indoor isolation has historically served as a punishment for the most heinous law-breakers. Yet, Curdie's modern-day parents would overlook the many news reports[\[2\]](#) documenting prisoners who prize their two hours of daily outdoor time. And while many a felon credits his mental survival for these fleeting moments outside, few mothers in suburbia, or teachers in a classroom, have seen fit to offer the endless delight of the outdoors that is intelligently designed for the frolicking of her children.

**Second, the deterioration of literature and art.** Instead of becoming a student of the comedy of Shakespeare, the verse of Robert Louis Stevenson, or the wonder of A. A. Milne, Curdie would today be raised under the tutelage of many hardcover books that reference bodily functions, covered by artwork that could be accomplished by any five-year-old who recently conquered a proper pencil-holding technique. Note: a joyous five-year-old happens to reside in our own home, and we adore her endless production artwork. But her newly found passion for drawing cats in no way compares to, say, Da Vinci's ability to paint "The Virgin of the Rocks."[\[3\]](#) Tragically, cultural gatekeepers long ago abandoned their historic duty of encouraging beauty and truth in art, shunning hedonistic self-glorification.[\[4\]](#) Just as insulting would be Curdie's exposure to literature that largely consists of the derivative twaddle of action movies and video games. Sir Walter Scott's linking of poetry and character radically contravenes contemporary sensibilities: "Teach your children poetry. It opens the mind, lends grace to wisdom and makes the heroic virtues hereditary."

**Third, the cacophony of artificial sound.** Our transplanted Curdie would also be unable to soak up the irreplaceable sounds and sights of animals darting and trees rustling and brooks babbling – all of which create fertile soil in young people's imaginations. Rather, poor Curdie would find himself

awash in an environment constantly beeping, buzzing, vibrating, dinging, and blaring. How is it that humans have come to expect an environment that not even fifty years ago would have easily passed a dystopic torture chamber?

**Fourth, a language of drivel.** Curdie's language would assuredly suffer the effects of his twenty-first-century peers. While it is expected that young people, still growing in their knowledge and mastery of grammar rules, will botch and bumble over the misfortunately abused word "like," a badge of shame should be affixed upon a cultural ethos in which the language of adults and children is indistinguishable. Curdie's vocabulary would be singularly plain, slipshod, and of a quality that in earlier generations would have elicited sympathy (from a passionate English teacher ready to take him under his wing) or irritation (from an equally passionate adult who abhorred such an abuse of language). What would Macdonald's literarily-adept Curie call upon to ward off the goblins? Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British educator Charlotte Mason warned that "Imagination does not stir at the suggestion of the feeble, much-diluted stuff that is too often put into children's hands," and the same wisdom applies to the language put into children's minds. The stockpile of language upon which Curdie's life depends (perpetually simmering in a richly developed imagination) would simply cease to exist.

**Fifth, the elimination of free time.** Alas, how would our modern-day Curdie be able to function in a mine, alone by himself for hours, while he overhears and outwits the treacherous plots of goblins on the other side of the cave wall? Or how could he transverse the countryside without a moment's ill-ease? In Macdonald's world, this boy would have a veritable fount of stories, lymericisms, ideas, and images to keep him company – stored up in his head from the books, poetry, and songs constituting his atmosphere from birth. And an hour-stroll through the hillside could have been spent with

nary a twitch. By contrast, a jaunt through any suburban park in 2018 would reveal just how much modern-day notions of childhood have deteriorated. It is rare to spend time on a hiking path and discover a family partaking in the elements without one or two children tripping over stones – not due to lack of agility, but rather to the permanent affixation of their eyeballs to the screens in their palms. Even a stroll through nature must be ruined by the ever-present, always-addicting device that demands allegiance in every environment. Were a passerby to see Curdie with a walking stick in hand and a folk song on his lips, he would mournfully tear his eyes from the flashing screen and wonder from whence this alien creature had come. *What! A walk through the woods without a device beeping and flashing and reducing the capacity of neural pathways? What kind of creature is this?*

**Sixth, the fixation with irrational socialization.** But perhaps most woeful of all might be Curdie's absolute inability to navigate the always-reforming-but-perpetually-worsening ethos of socialization. How could Curdie's heroic protection of Princess Irene and her nurse, waylaid at dusk on a hillside and in danger of goblin attack, have germinated in today's confused and hypersexualized gender free-for-all? Curdie himself delivered Irene and the nurse safely to the front door and had the audacity to treat Irene as a lady *and* to vouch for her safety and honor. Good riddance. Curdie would be mocked, scorned, and lampooned by the self-appointed sages of our day: *What a misogynistic patriarch! Could Curdie not see that Irene and her nurse should have been left to fend for themselves, facing the threat of the goblins? Surely their safety and honor are a small price to pay for the larger social justice cause of equal rights for the most obnoxious and privilege for the latest boundary-breakers.*

And so, our modern-day Curdie would have no ability to think, rest, imagine, wander, wonder, delight, protect, honor, defend, and create in the twenty-first century. Instead, he

would take his place alongside the millions of other children raised, by default, to be slaves to group-think, addicted to endorphins released only in greater capacity from a digital device, burdened with neural pathways so obliterated that nary a logical thought might pass from brain to lips.

What does it take to rescue our children from this tsunami of emotional and intellectual sludge? In a future essay, I will look at the myriad of ways in which delight, imagination, and memory can form the foundation of childhood so that goblins may properly be bludgeoned to death by a valiant verse-slinging hero.

[1] George Macdonald, [\*The Princess and the Goblin\*](#), London: Puffin Books, 2016, p. 49.

[2] Vinopal, Lauren “Prisoners Get More Time Outside Than Your Kid Does, A Worldwide Survey Says.” *Fatherly* (August 23, 2016).

[3] “Leonardo da Vinci’s Virgin of the Rocks.” *ItalianRenaissance.org*, May 22, 2013.

[4] See Nancy Pearcey’s excellent book, [\*Saving Leonardo\*](#), for a more detailed discussion of the devolution of art.

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