

ENGLISH LEARNING  
FOR CURIOUS  
MINDS



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**Episode #333**  
**Enid Blyton | Britain's Most Divisive Children's Writer**  
**17th Jan, 2023**

[00:00:05] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today is part two of our three-part mini-series on British children's authors.

[00:00:29] In part one, we explored the unusual life of Lewis Carroll, the author of Alice in Wonderland.

[00:00:36] In part three, we'll follow Roald Dahl and how he became the famous author of books like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Matilda.

[00:00:46] And today, in part two, we'll look at the life and work of a lady called Enid Blyton.

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[00:00:52] Now, she might be the least famous of the three outside the UK, but she is one of the best-selling children's authors of the 20th century, selling more than 600 million books, and in fact she is the 7th most commercially successful author of all time.

[00:01:11] She was loved by millions of children, but [loathed](#)<sup>1</sup> by many parents.

[00:01:16] From the outside, she was the perfect wife and mother, writing about her marvellous life and her love of children.

[00:01:24] Yet [behind the scenes](#)<sup>2</sup>, the reality was very, very different.

[00:01:30] So, let's get right into it and learn about the life and work of Enid Blyton, Britain's Most [Divisive](#)<sup>3</sup> Children's Writer.

[00:01:40] In 1952 at the age of 55, Enid Blyton wrote in her autobiography:

[00:01:47] "As you can imagine we are a happy little family. I could not possibly write a single good book for children if I were not happy with my family, or if I didn't put them [first and foremost](#)<sup>4</sup>."

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<sup>1</sup> hated

<sup>2</sup> happening privately without being known by the public

<sup>3</sup> causing disagreement or division

<sup>4</sup> in the most important position

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[00:02:01] Indeed, it's true that Blyton had written many good books, a **whopping**<sup>5</sup> 700 throughout her whole career, and she had **cultivated**<sup>6</sup> tens of millions of young fans.

[00:02:13] To her fans, she was a **wholesome**<sup>7</sup> mother sharing sweet stories with the world, but behind closed doors, the reality was anything but.

[00:02:25] While she wrote stories **urging**<sup>8</sup> children to be kind and generous, to act as good, moral citizens, in her private life, she did not **heed**<sup>9</sup> the same advice.

[00:02:36] And over time, it would appear that Blyton's books of fun, adventure and friendship were **masking**<sup>10</sup> a very different reality.

[00:02:46] And this reality started with a **broken home**<sup>11</sup>, a **dysfunctional**<sup>12</sup> childhood of her own.

[00:02:54] She was born in London, in 1897, but her childhood was not a happy one.

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<sup>5</sup> impressive and surprising

<sup>6</sup> won the support or favour of

<sup>7</sup> proper, good

<sup>8</sup> recommending strongly

<sup>9</sup> follow, pay attention to

<sup>10</sup> covering, hiding

<sup>11</sup> family in which the parents were separated

<sup>12</sup> not normal or proper

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[00:03:02] She would hear her parents have **ferocious<sup>13</sup>** arguments, then one day, when she was 13, her father left, he walked out for good.

[00:03:13] Blyton was heartbroken and felt she had lost her best friend.

[00:03:19] She **blamed<sup>14</sup>** her mother for her father's departure, and she never forgave her for it.

[00:03:25] To distract herself, she retreated to her bedroom and spent most of her time writing.

[00:03:31] And it was not long before she had won a poetry competition and when she was just 14 her work was published in a children's magazine.

[00:03:40] She was thrilled and from that moment on she knew she wanted to be a writer.

[00:03:47] But her mother was not supportive of her daughter's dream, believing that as a young woman, her daughter's focus should've been on learning household **chores<sup>15</sup>** and learning how to look after a home.

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<sup>13</sup> very intense, extreme

<sup>14</sup> considered her responsible for

<sup>15</sup> boring and tiring tasks or pieces of work

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[00:04:00] Essentially, she should have focused on following the traditional Victorian path of finding a husband, raising children, and **devoting**<sup>16</sup> her attention to looking after the house and her family.

[00:04:14] Blyton wasn't so **keen on**<sup>17</sup> this idea and soon she could think of nothing but leaving her home and **striking out**<sup>18</sup> on her own.

[00:04:24] By the time she was 19 she did just that, when in 1916 she left home to begin training as a primary school teacher, never to speak to her mother again.

[00:04:36] Alongside her teaching job, she continued writing and entering competitions.

[00:04:43] By 1921, things were starting to **look up**<sup>19</sup>, the situation was more positive.

[00:04:50] She won another competition and the following year would see the publication of her first book, a collection of 28 poems called Child Whispers.

[00:05:01] And over the next decade, her writing career would really take off, it really became commercially successful.

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<sup>16</sup> giving, committing

<sup>17</sup> showing interest in

<sup>18</sup> starting doing something new

<sup>19</sup> become better

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[00:05:08] This was helped by the start of her regular [contributions](#)<sup>20</sup> to a magazine called Teachers' World.

[00:05:15] The magazine provided teachers with a variety of material written for children to be used in their classrooms.

[00:05:23] Blyton wrote short stories, poems, and essays and soon her [column](#)<sup>21</sup> became an incredible piece of marketing.

[00:05:32] Teachers' World really gave Blyton the opportunity to design her own image and attract fans who would buy her books.

[00:05:41] Her brand was one of a [wholesome](#) writer who offered [whimsical](#)<sup>22</sup>, or playful, descriptions of the world around her.

[00:05:49] She combined the familiar settings of schools, playgrounds, and the outdoors with exciting stories of mysteries and adventure.

[00:05:59] Sometimes she would write about nature or natural history but often the world became [animated](#)<sup>23</sup> with flowers, fairies and talking animals.

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<sup>20</sup> pieces of writing to be published

<sup>21</sup> regular section of a magazine

<sup>22</sup> playful

<sup>23</sup> lively, full of life and interest

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[00:06:09] Her most popular [contributions](#) were, in fact, letters written from her little dog called Bobs.

[00:06:17] And over the years Blyton continued to write for the magazine and increasingly told her readers more about her life, making everything sound wonderful.

[00:06:28] She would often mention her husband, her perfect daughters Gillian and Imogen, and how happy they all were in their beautiful home.

[00:06:38] And her strategy clearly worked, as just two years after she began writing in Teachers' World she was making £1,200 a year, which is the equivalent of around 60,000 euros a year today.

[00:06:53] There are, interestingly enough, many [parallels](#)<sup>24</sup> between Enid Blyton in the 1920s, and modern day influencers, YouTubers or TikTokers 100 years later.

[00:07:05] Enid Blyton offered her fans an almost real-time [intimate](#)<sup>25</sup> [glance](#)<sup>26</sup> into the details of her life, her family, and her thought process.

[00:07:17] Instead of likes and followers, though, Blyton received thousands of letters from children which she spent hours replying to.

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<sup>24</sup> similarities

<sup>25</sup> relating to her personal or private life

<sup>26</sup> quick look

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[00:07:26] But, much like some modern influencers, you might say, things weren't quite as they seemed.

[00:07:34] By the 1930s her life was more like a [soap opera](#)<sup>27</sup> than a fairy tale, and it was certainly far from the [harmonious](#)<sup>28</sup> one the public read about in Teachers' World.

[00:07:47] After the birth of her first daughter Gillian in 1931, Blyton's marriage to her first husband, Hugh Pollock, was starting to fall apart.

[00:07:58] Her husband had fought in the First World War, and, like so many men who had survived the war, was still likely suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

[00:08:10] As a way to [cope](#)<sup>29</sup>, he turned to [the bottle](#)<sup>30</sup>, and fell deeper and deeper into a [spiral](#)<sup>31</sup> of alcoholism.

[00:08:19] To make matters worse, he also started an affair with his secretary.

[00:08:23] Blyton was furious, also starting a series of affairs herself, but none of this would be revealed until much later, nothing would get in the way of the clean and perfect public image she presented.

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<sup>27</sup> a television serial about daily events in the lives of a group of characters

<sup>28</sup> balanced, peaceful

<sup>29</sup> deal with it

<sup>30</sup> drinking (alcohol)

<sup>31</sup> a difficult situation that was getting worse and worse

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[00:08:38] And while she would write about being the perfect mother, and the importance of motherhood, Blyton rarely saw her own children, preferring writing or responding to letters from other children than seeing her own.

[00:08:53] The children were looked after by a team of [nannies](#)<sup>32</sup>, and Blyton would only see her daughter at [designated](#)<sup>33</sup> times, usually only for one hour after dinner.

[00:09:05] And after the birth of her second daughter, Imogen, in 1934, things had continued to [go downhill](#)<sup>34</sup>.

[00:09:14] Blyton saw her daughters even less and her husband had taken to drinking secretly in the [cellar](#)<sup>35</sup>.

[00:09:21] Later in life, her daughter Imogen would admit that as a young girl she saw so little of her mother that she did not even realise that she was her mother.

[00:09:33] And although you might think, well perhaps she preferred other children to her own, it seems that she wasn't even very [keen on](#) other children either.

[00:09:43] There's a story of Blyton getting cross with a little girl who lived next door to her because she was singing too loudly.

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<sup>32</sup> women whose job was to take care of them

<sup>33</sup> specified, appointed

<sup>34</sup> become worse

<sup>35</sup> a room below ground level in the house, often used for storing things

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[00:09:51] Blyton shouted at her, demanding she be quiet. When the girl would not, she demanded the girl's mother do something.

[00:10:01] But the mother didn't see anything wrong. The girl was singing, and surely Blyton, as the country's leading example of how to be a good parent, could understand.

[00:10:13] **Enraged**<sup>36</sup>, Blyton **retaliated**<sup>37</sup> in the best way she knew.

[00:10:18] She wrote a nasty story about the girl, transforming her into a character called Lucy Loud-Voice.

[00:10:26] Now, we've heard a bit about her personal life, what of her writing, you may be thinking?

[00:10:32] Well, firstly, it was **prolific**<sup>38</sup>.

[00:10:35] She was known to write anywhere from 6,000 to 10,000 words a day. And let's not forget she would be writing on a **typewriter**<sup>39</sup>, which certainly wasn't easy.

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<sup>36</sup> very angry

<sup>37</sup> reacted, hit back

<sup>38</sup> producing a great number of writings

<sup>39</sup> a machine that was commonly used in the past and which had keys that were pressed in order to print letters, numbers, etc

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[00:10:47] Throughout the Second World War, despite the fact that paper was **rationed**<sup>40</sup>, it was in limited supply, Blyton never stopped writing.

[00:10:57] In 1942 she published 22 books, and managed another 23 a year later.

[00:11:04] And these were always alongside **countless**<sup>41</sup> magazine articles, interviews and poems.

[00:11:10] It's not hard to see how she became one of the most **prolific** children's authors of all time.

[00:11:17] And it's fair to say that by the end of the war in 1945, Blyton, aged 48, was quite the celebrity and was enjoying an incredible amount of success.

[00:11:28] She was regularly producing new adventure books for series like The Famous Five, The Faraway Tree, and Malory Towers.

[00:11:37] By 1949, Blyton had also written the first Secret Seven and Noddy books.

[00:11:43] She was like **a machine**<sup>42</sup>, writing tens of thousands of words every week.

[00:11:49] At her **peak**<sup>43</sup>, she was writing around 50 books a year.

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<sup>40</sup> in limited supply

<sup>41</sup> too many to be counted

<sup>42</sup> someone who worked tirelessly like a device or machine

<sup>43</sup> highest point of activity

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[00:11:53] People began **rumours**<sup>44</sup> that she actually had a team of **ghost writers**<sup>45</sup> but she always denied this.

[00:11:59] The popularity of her books likely **stemmed from**<sup>46</sup> children enjoying the adventures of **protagonists**<sup>47</sup> their own age in settings British children were familiar with.

[00:12:10] Many of Blyton's books, such as The Famous Five, take place in the English countryside or at the seaside, the main holiday destinations for families at the time.

[00:12:21] Other stories, such as those of Malory Towers, are set in schools and involve friendship, **mischief**<sup>48</sup>, and growing-up, all **relatable**<sup>49</sup> topics for Blyton's young audience.

[00:12:34] If you've read any of them, you'll know that the books are simple, the stories are easy for a young audience to understand.

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<sup>44</sup> information shared among people without having been proved that it was true

<sup>45</sup> people who wrote works for her to be published under her name

<sup>46</sup> is caused by

<sup>47</sup> main characters of the stories

<sup>48</sup> being naughty

<sup>49</sup> making them feel that they can relate to them

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[00:12:42] Compared to the works of Roald Dahl or Lewis Carroll, with at times difficult language and complicated [plots](#)<sup>50</sup>, there isn't much depth to them.

[00:12:53] They're not amazing stories, they are quite basic adventure stories, predictable, and not super interesting, they're very different from the truly magical worlds created by the other authors in this mini-series, and later of course by J.K. Rowling.

[00:13:11] As you might imagine, this meant that Enid Blyton was frequently dismissed, [criticised](#)<sup>51</sup>, by adults as an author not worth reading.

[00:13:21] For a 30-year period she was actually [banned](#)<sup>52</sup> by the BBC, because they considered that her work didn't have "much literary value", and that she was, quote, "a [tenacious](#)<sup>53</sup> [second-rater](#)<sup>54</sup>".

[00:13:36] Essentially, her books were without [substance](#)<sup>55</sup>, they weren't very good.

[00:13:41] But this didn't stop her commercial success, because her readers, children, loved her.

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<sup>50</sup> storylines

<sup>51</sup> judged (in a negative way)

<sup>52</sup> not allowed

<sup>53</sup> not willing to give up, persistent

<sup>54</sup> someone who was not very good or of lesser quality

<sup>55</sup> the quality of being important

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[00:13:49] For her adult supporters, they put forward the argument that children don't always want or need complicated [plots](#); they enjoy familiarity, they like the idea of knowing what might happen, and this is why Blyton's extensive body of work was so loved by teen readers, teenage readers.

[00:14:09] And she would, in time, create something for an even younger audience that would make her even more of a [household name](#)<sup>56</sup>.

[00:14:18] In 1949, she created the Noddy series.

[00:14:23] In case you don't know Noddy is a toy with a blue hat and a red shirt, he lives in a place called ToyLand and has a friend called Big Ears. For the French listeners, you might know him as Oui-Oui.

[00:14:38] The important thing for our story is that he was a huge commercial success, there are still Noddy TV series, toys, and [merchandise](#)<sup>57</sup>, and he made Enid Blyton even more of a [household name](#).

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<sup>56</sup> a person that was well known

<sup>57</sup> products related to it

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[00:14:52] But, much like all of Blyton's other work, Noddy wasn't [unanimously](#)<sup>58</sup> loved, with the character being described by one 1960s critic as "the most [egocentric](#)<sup>59</sup>, joyless, [snivelling](#)<sup>60</sup> and [pious](#)<sup>61</sup> anti-hero in the history of British fiction".

[00:15:10] Nevertheless, young children loved him.

[00:15:13] And as if Blyton wasn't doing enough by writing [countless](#) books for her series, in 1953 she started her own magazine as well.

[00:15:22] Her [contributions](#) to the magazine were as impressive as her books but the real achievement of the publication was the money it raised for charity.

[00:15:32] Blyton invited children to join different clubs and each would raise money for either animals, disabled children or a children's care home.

[00:15:42] And by the end of the magazine in 1959, £35,000 had been raised, the equivalent of almost a million euros today.

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<sup>58</sup> with the agreement of all people involved

<sup>59</sup> thinking only of himself, selfish

<sup>60</sup> crying, whining

<sup>61</sup> not honest, hypocritical

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[00:15:52] **Aside from**<sup>62</sup> her huge commercial success, and charitable work, she would continue to have her **fair share**<sup>63</sup> of haters, critics, throughout her career.

[00:16:03] Yes, there were those who thought her work was without **substance**, that it was **vapid**<sup>64</sup> and uninteresting.

[00:16:10] But she would later be accused of being much worse than an uninteresting author.

[00:16:16] She would be accused of being **xenophobic**<sup>65</sup>, racist, and **homophobic**<sup>66</sup>.

[00:16:22] In one book, the explanation for the villains being thieves was simply because they were foreign.

[00:16:29] In another, she wrote about a doll that was hated by his owners due to his, and these are Blyton's exact words, "ugly black face".

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<sup>62</sup> apart from, besides

<sup>63</sup> more than enough, a lot

<sup>64</sup> boring, not inspired

<sup>65</sup> showing a dislike of people from other countries

<sup>66</sup> showing a dislike of gay people

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[00:16:40] Indeed, in 2019, the Royal Mint, which produces all of Britain's [coins](#)<sup>67</sup>, refused to honour Enid Blyton on a [commemorative](#)<sup>68</sup> 50 pence [coin](#)<sup>69</sup>, explaining that they consider her to be “a “racist, sexist [homophobe](#)<sup>70</sup> and not a very well-regarded writer.”

[00:17:00] It's not clear exactly where they got the [homophobic](#) part from, as this wasn't specified, plus she was also [rumoured](#)<sup>71</sup> to have had a lesbian relationship with one of her [nannies](#), but the xenophobic and racist comments are certainly not without justification.

[00:17:17] Despite all this controversy, she is the 7th most successful author in the world, there have been over 600 million copies of her books sold and she has been translated into over 90 languages.

[00:17:30] So, the story of Enid Blyton is one of [contradictions](#)<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> the small round pieces of metal that are used as money

<sup>68</sup> made to officially remember and give respect to her

<sup>69</sup> a small round piece of metal that is used as money

<sup>70</sup> someone who dislikes gay people

<sup>71</sup> said (without proof given), supposed

<sup>72</sup> very different things

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[00:17:35] Her books were **dismissed**<sup>73</sup> as **second-rate**<sup>74</sup> and simple by a generation of adults and she was **banned** by the country's largest **broadcaster**<sup>75</sup>.

[00:17:45] Despite this, she went on to be the best-selling British author of the 20th century.

[00:17:52] On a personal level, the **contradictions** were perhaps even greater.

[00:17:57] In public, she raised huge amounts of money for charity. In private, she was clearly **vindictive**<sup>76</sup> and **mean**<sup>77</sup>.

[00:18:06] In public, she was the perfect mother. In her private life, despite being one of the most popular children's authors in history, her own daughter didn't even realise her mother was her mother.

[00:18:20] And while **evaluating**<sup>78</sup> the life and work of Enid Blyton, there are certainly two **distinct**<sup>79</sup> camps, strong arguments on both sides.

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<sup>73</sup> treated as not worthy, rejected

<sup>74</sup> not very good, of lesser quality

<sup>75</sup> an organisation that transmits or presents a programme or information by radio or television

<sup>76</sup> showing a strong desire for revenge, not forgiving

<sup>77</sup> not kind, bad

<sup>78</sup> judging, assessing

<sup>79</sup> clearly noticeable or different

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[00:18:30] While she clearly held some views we now consider at best **outdated**<sup>80</sup> and at worst disgraceful, she provided an entire generation of children with a huge body of adventure books, and can claim responsibility for turning a generation of young minds into a generation of readers.

[00:18:50] She passed away in 1968, it's been more than 50 years since she died, and it seems that the **controversy**<sup>81</sup> around her life and work will continue for many years to come.

[00:19:04] Ok then, that is it for part two of this mini-series, on the controversial life and works of Enid Blyton.

[00:19:11] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you learned a bit about the real life of this hugely successful author.

[00:19:19] As always I would love to know what you thought about this episode.

[00:19:22] Have you read any Enid Blyton books?

[00:19:25] What did you think about her? Can you see why she and her works are controversial?

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<sup>80</sup> old-fashioned, no longer accepted

<sup>81</sup> arguments and disagreements

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[00:19:30] What role do you think adults should play in deciding what books children should read? Should kids decide for themselves, or should simplistic books like Enid Blyton's be avoided?

[00:19:42] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started.

[00:19:46] You can head right into our community forum, which is at [community.leonardoenglish.com](https://community.leonardoenglish.com) and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:19:54] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:19:59] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

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## Key vocabulary

<b>Word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Loathed</b>	hated
<b>Behind the scenes</b>	happening privately without being known by the public
<b>Divisive</b>	causing disagreement or division
<b>First and foremost</b>	in the most important position
<b>Whopping</b>	impressing and surprising
<b>Cultivated</b>	won the support or favour of
<b>Wholesome</b>	proper, good
<b>Urging</b>	recommending strongly
<b>Heed</b>	follow, pay attention to
<b>Masking</b>	covering, hiding
<b>Broken home</b>	family in which the parents were separated
<b>Dysfunctional</b>	not normal or proper

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<b>Ferocious</b>	very intense, extreme
<b>Blamed</b>	considered her responsible for
<b>Chores</b>	boring and tiring tasks or pieces of work
<b>Devoting</b>	giving, committing
<b>Keen on</b>	showing interest in
<b>Striking out</b>	starting doing something new
<b>Look up</b>	become better
<b>Contributions</b>	pieces of writing to be published
<b>Column</b>	regular section of a magazine
<b>Whimsical</b>	playful
<b>Animated</b>	lively, full of life and interest
<b>Parallels</b>	similarities
<b>Intimate</b>	relating to her personal or private life
<b>Glance</b>	quick look
<b>Soap opera</b>	a television serial about daily events in the lives of a group of characters

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<b>Harmonious</b>	balanced, peaceful
<b>Cope</b>	deal with it
<b>The bottle</b>	drinking (alcohol)
<b>Spiral</b>	a difficult situation that was getting worse and worse
<b>Nannies</b>	women whose job was to take care of them
<b>Designated</b>	specified, appointed
<b>Go downhill</b>	become worse
<b>Cellar</b>	a room below ground level in the house, often used for storing things
<b>Enraged</b>	very angry
<b>Retaliated</b>	reacted, hit back
<b>Prolific</b>	producing a great number of writings
<b>Typewriter</b>	a machine that was commonly used in the past and which had keys that were pressed in order to print letters, numbers, etc
<b>Rationed</b>	in limited supply
<b>Countless</b>	too many to be counted
<b>A machine</b>	someone who worked tirelessly like a device or machine

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<b>Peak</b>	highest point of activity
<b>Rumours</b>	information shared among people without having been proved that it was true
<b>Ghost writers</b>	people who wrote works for her to be published under her name
<b>Stemmed from</b>	is caused by
<b>Protagonists</b>	main characters of the stories
<b>Mischief</b>	being naughty
<b>Relatable</b>	making them feel that they can relate to them
<b>Plots</b>	storylines
<b>Criticised</b>	judged (in a negative way)
<b>Banned</b>	not allowed
<b>Tenacious</b>	not willing to give up, persistent
<b>Second-rater</b>	someone who was not very good or of lesser quality
<b>Substance</b>	the quality of being important
<b>Household name</b>	a person that was well known
<b>Merchandise</b>	products related to it

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<b>Unanimously</b>	with the agreement of all people involved
<b>Egocentric</b>	thinking only of himself, selfish
<b>Snivelling</b>	crying, whining
<b>Pious</b>	not honest, hypocritical
<b>Aside from</b>	apart from, besides
<b>Fair share</b>	more than enough, a lot
<b>Vapid</b>	boring, not inspired
<b>Xenophobic</b>	showing a dislike of people from other countries
<b>Homophobic</b>	showing a dislike of gay people
<b>Coins</b>	the small round pieces of metal that are used as money
<b>Commemorative</b>	made to officially remember and give respect to her
<b>Coin</b>	a small round piece of metal that is used as money
<b>Homophobe</b>	someone who dislikes gay people
<b>Rumoured</b>	said (without proof given), supposed
<b>Contradictions</b>	very different things

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<b>Dismissed</b>	treated as not worthy, rejected
<b>Second-rate</b>	not very good, of lesser quality
<b>Broadcaster</b>	an organisation that transmits or presents a programme or information by radio or television
<b>Vindictive</b>	showing a strong desire for revenge, not forgiving
<b>Mean</b>	not kind, bad
<b>Evaluating</b>	judging, assessing
<b>Distinct</b>	clearly noticeable or different
<b>Outdated</b>	old-fashioned, no longer accepted
<b>Controversy</b>	arguments and disagreements

*We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.*

*What did you like? What could we do better?*

*What did you struggle to understand?*

*Let us know in the forum [community.leonardoenglish.com](https://community.leonardoenglish.com)*