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Words matter. The way in which we are represented does have an impact on the way in which we understand ourselves. Unfortunately for the children who became the focus of the child rescue movement, which arose in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century and spread throughout the empire, the words which evoked pity and hence contributions from potential donors rarely constructed them in a positive way. This book arose from our intersecting interests in the history of childhood and of literature written for children. It begins by inviting the reader to explore the literature produced by the child rescue movement as received by contemporary readers, both through its own publications and through the children's literature that incorporated child rescue themes. It then reverses the lens to ask readers to imagine the impact of such writing on the children who provided the subject matter, worked in the printeries that produced it and became its readers in their cottage homes, foster and employment placements – not all of which were as idyllic as the literature would suggest.

In undertaking this analysis our aim is not to demean the work of the child rescue organisations, many of which continue today as vital providers of support to troubled families. Nor is it intended to further demean the children who were described in such denigratory and often racially offensive ways. Rather it is to urge caution, particularly in relation to simplistic solutions which see rescue as the answer to the problem of child abuse and neglect. The past has left a legacy in the present, just as present problems and practice have their origins in the past. This book aims to articulate such links in order to inform contemporary practice and policy.

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