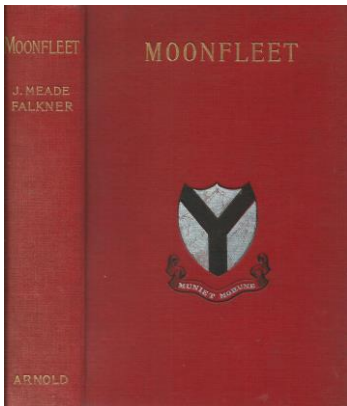


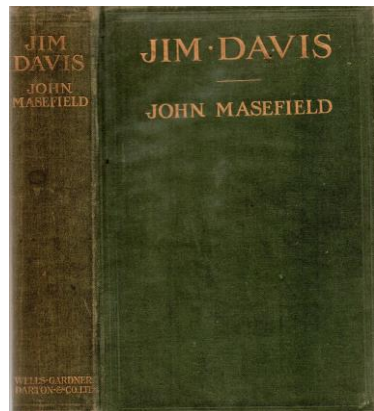
*The Theme of Innocence and Experience in Moonfleet  
and Jim Davis by John Masefield*

Hamish Guthrie

Both John Trenchard and Jim Davis, in their respective stories, come into an early suspicion and deepening awareness of the murky world of the smugglers' underworld. In this dangerous atmosphere, their being orphans makes them all the more vulnerable. Like the two girls, Lina and Elena, in Ella Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, they feel dawning suspicions and fears of several people around them. This is perhaps the central fact of their lives. Both boys are intrigued by the underworld, are drawn to it, and almost inevitably become embroiled in it. As orphans, they find friendship there, and their lives become more and more emotionally and imaginatively affected by the history and legends of contraband, and by the lives of the friends they make in the dark night-water business. The boys' friendships require them to make choices and to live with the consequences. The central theme in their stories is the change from innocence to experience. The catalyst of this change is the friendships these orphans make in their new homes. *Moonfleet* is, in the end, the richer story, reaching as it does a great tragic climax, and creating the two characters of Trenchard and Elzevir Block who are more complex than any character in *Jim Davis*, but a comparison of these two stories is a useful way of appreciating several of their most interesting features.

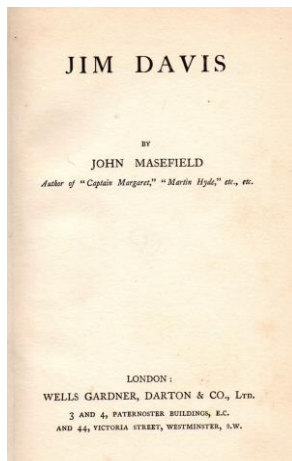
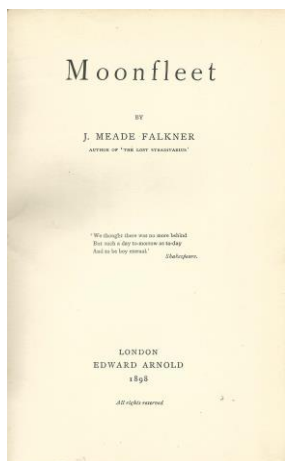


**Arnold first edition – 1898**



**Wells Gardner first edition – 1911**

The boys are both orphans and further similarities spread from this central similarity. Orphans must always strike out on their own, and they are immediately dependent on their friends - whoever they may be, trustworthy or not. The wild snowy night when he makes the trek to his aunt and uncle's cottage, where he goes to live, Jim Davis meets Mrs. Cottier and her son Hugh, and Jim is very grateful for her surprising, generous spontaneous offer of help that extends so far as to serve as his surrogate mother. And further events that night immediately prove Jim's need of such help when, out of the storm, they are threatened by the night riders - rough men who seem as wild as the elements themselves. And John Trenchard is as destitute of friendship as Jim. Good woman though she is in the eyes of the town, the aunt the boy Trenchard goes to live with is as fearful of him as he is of her, and of all suspicious eyes in Moonfleet. In the night shadows under the law a trusting face is as hard to recognize as a thief. The boys' suspicions are alive early. It is interesting that their eyes are awakened much more quickly to the threats around them than Lina and Elena are in their stories.



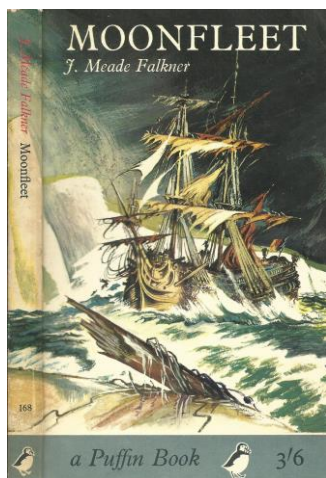
Falkner's and Masefield's tales are both essentially about two boys' paths to maturity through the various choices they make in a very rough, wild, murky world. Sheltered by adoptive family but always significantly independent, both Jim and John must make choices as soon as they leave the house - literally, at its very doorstep. Scorned by his aunt, Trenchard has to find what companionship he can in Moonfleet; hence his early trust

in Mr. Glennie, his tutor. And Trenchard feels so rejected by his aunt that he leaves her house very quickly and find various other lodgings and loyalties elsewhere. His curiosity naturally finds Elzevir Block, the topic of rumours and gossip, much more interesting than his staid aunt. Trenchard is much more at loose ends than Davis. Davis can always return to his aunt and uncle's cottage. And his aunt and uncle leave him to his own resources most of the time, at liberty to do what he likes. But at the front door Davis learns that the way he turns has serious consequences. Going one way down the lane he may meet His Majesty's soldiers, searching for the night riders he saw himself on the prowl the night before. The other direction leads to the safety of the barn. But even there, how secure are the animals, if, unbeknownst to anyone on the farm, the horse can be removed from the stable, used for the night, and secretly returned lame?

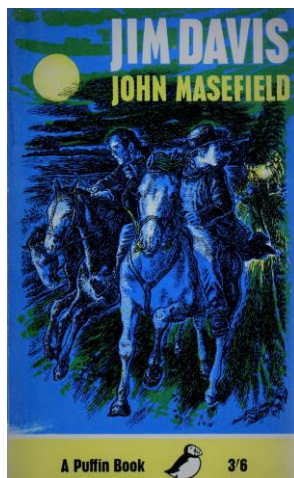
An orphan needs a father, or at least a friend to take a father's place. Both Trenchard and Davis find such a figure very early in their stories. For Trenchard it's Elzevir Block, keeper of the *Why Not?* tavern, and for Davis it's the smuggler Marat whom Davis and his friend Hugh first come across sending signals one morning on a nearby hill. Both boys fall quickly into the underworld's mystique. Davis, fascinated by Marat's mysterious code of signals on the hill, is fascinated by this stranger, and easily lured to Marat's hiding place under the gorse at the edge of the village. The boy Trenchard, one night out wandering the town, wanting out from the cold loneliness of his aunt's forbidding house, stops to watch Ratsey the engraver, at work on a tombstone for David Block, Elzevir's son, killed one recent night when smugglers were apprehended. Trenchard is as intrigued by the dead boy's story as he is by tales in the Arabian Nights he's reading. Many things combine to fascinate him. His admired teacher, Mr. Glennie was sympathetic enough to the boy's misfortune as to compose the poem about him that Ratsey cuts on the gravestone. And when Ratsey suggests after the work on the stone is done, that Trenchard come down to the *Why Not?*, the tavern kept by the dead boy's father, Trenchard goes feeling invited into a cabal. He goes to find and mingle in the hidden intimacy of the smugglers' underworld. He is thrilled to see a place his aunt condemns; her scorn makes the tavern all the more desirable! The very thought of the tavern gives him, he says, "pleasure without alloy."

Both boys find in the smugglers' life a warmth and welcome they never knew at home. Most ironically, they find in the brotherhood of crime, a

kinship and home they never felt in their families. Davis may be threatened by his first sense of entrapment in Marat's hiding place, but this fear is eclipsed by the awe and wonder he feels at Marat's gifts of two exquisitely crafted model ships. What parent ever gave him gifts like these? And at the *Why Not?* Trenchard meets Elzevir, a man much harder to know than Marat in the other story. But in a tavern which his aunt shuns like sin, Trenchard finds Elzevir, the greatest friend of his life. The underworld of crime for both boys is a warm, welcoming, nurturing place. Trenchard likes and admires both his tutor, Mr. Glennie and Elzevir Block. But of the two, the kind and gentle tutor, and the aloof, moody, tavern-keeper who is much harder to know and understand, it's the tavern-keeper who has the deeper grip on Trenchard's thoughts. Elzevir is all the more distinctive in the reader's mind, and in Trenchard's mind because he is at first such a sharp dark contrast to the sunnier, kinder man.



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Both boys are drawn into a new world that unfolds like a riddle that needs solving. Davis wonders who this stranger Marat is; where does he come from; what does he do; and where does he get such wonderful gifts that appear like jewels fallen out of a fantasy? Trenchard, in his story, wonders who the dead boy David Block is, and why does such a good man as Mr. Glennie feel such pity for a boy rumoured to be tangled in crime that the tutor composes the boy's epitaph?

All of this is connected to the central theme of the awakening of a young person's mind. This theme which has fascinated writers as diverse as Proust and Wordsworth acquires added dimensions in both Faulkner's and Masfield's stories, from the central common predicament of being orphans. All young minds wake to the exhilaration of the sensual world. But for Jim Davis and John Trenchard, this awakening is doubly charged by the natural fearfulness and strangeness they feel as orphans, and their increased vulnerability, and particularly by their dawning awareness of the criminal intrigue they have fallen into, and which fascinates them. For Wordsworth, youth is a time of drinking the vitality of the green sensual world, and it happens as naturally as breathing.

*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream  
The earth and every common sight  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.*

Coming to his aunt and uncle's farm, Jim Davis loves the place, wanders about in it, begins to feel at home in it, and enjoys getting to know it. He enjoys settling into the new and vibrant life there with something of the same exhilaration and pleasure Wordsworth describes. But Davis soon learns that the life and sounds of nature around him, beautiful in themselves as they are, may have a completely different meaning from what Wordsworth suggests. The wild sound of an owl may not be an owl at all, but a coded signal, a sign of the wariness a boy needs to survive.

Trenchard drinks in the world of Moonfleet as spontaneously. The sea is new to him, and particularly fascinating for its stories of storms and wrecks and lost treasure. The sea is a complex force, sometimes kind and mild, sometimes deadly and treacherous. Understanding the sea requires watching it and listening to it because one's life may depend on what the signs mean. Details of the sea are rich and troubling, as in this account of a storm at Moonfleet:

*"... there is a deadly under-tow or pushback of the water, which sucks them off their legs, and carries them again under the thundering waves. It is that back-suck of the pebbles that you may hear for miles inland..."*

The sounds of the seas' sucking and thundering, and the water's weight and pull and calamitous noise haunt Trenchard perpetually. He learns that life means to fear the sea and interpret it.

For the boy Trenchard, it's even more complicated. The natural world is huge and threatening. The sea invades Moonfleet, floods the marshes and the streets and houses, and causes the eerie groaning under the church. Here too are sounds that must be interpreted, decoded, unpuzzled. It is sound with the weight of a riddle. And whose interpretation of the groaning is right? Granny Tucker's theory that it's the Mohunes rising from their graves? Or is it Mr. Glennie's, that the groans are sounds of floating coffins rubbing the walls of the crypt? For Trenchard, the world is a vortex of signs that have to be studied and interpreted. And the meanings are not likely to be so happy and uplifting as they were for Wordsworth's boy!



**The Moonfleet smugglers**

Both Davis, at his aunt and uncle's farm near the sea, and Trenchard at Moonfleet, do come eventually to feel at home in the complicated world they are brought to. But it is a home they find and make for themselves from the friendships they make, and the people they choose to trust. The natural world is intimately involved in the experiences they pass through into early manhood, but it is a world they need to fight and decode and learn. They enjoy a strange kind of radical independence as orphans, which makes them, of necessity, the primary agents in their own survival. Both stories are moving tributes to the power of friendship. Like Huck Finn, both feel an independence that requires them to decide for themselves where

to put their primary loyalties. Huck, in his great water story, decides to commit the crime of assisting a Black friend, Jim, to escape slavery. Both Davis and Trenchard fall in with men whose life is contraband. Davis's story ends with him very glad to escape that life. Trenchard, much more like Huck, learns that the love and devotion of a friend is a much greater certainty even than the laws of the land. For Trenchard, the friendship he found in Elzevir Block emerges from a world so murky and troubled that his own aunt cannot understand it. But it is a friendship that saves his life.



**The frigate Laocoön**

John Meade Falkner – *Moonfleet* (Edward Arnold, 1898) 305pp.

John Masfield – *Jim Davis* (Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., 1911) 242pp.