



Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

Zohar Shavit

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Why devote a special issue to children's literature?—Because the field is new; the field is young; the field is currently establishing a range of sound and responsible scholarly work which is, at the same time, refreshingly stimulating. As a legitimate field of academic scholarship, children's literature is only beginning to make a name for itself, yet its status is ambivalent and often patronizingly addressed. Children's literature is regarded by traditional, "dressed to kill" literary criticism as an unwanted, if tenacious, stepsister, and perhaps understandably so.

As a new scholarly domain literally taking its first steps, children's literature has only recently made its debut as a field of study in its own right and has yet to be fully acknowledged and embraced by other academic spheres. On the whole, many of its own scholars prefer to address children's literature strictly within the context of certain traditional and somewhat timeworn questions dictated by literary criticism. Unfortunately, this tendency has been due to the overall adherence of its students to prevailing and well-acclaimed tenets as well as their inability to break away from conceptual commitments to the past. Indeed, the thrust of studies in children's literature to date has been somewhat lacking in the self-confidence essential to the pursuit and acquisition of a theoretical framework. Although those already involved in the field are well aware of its complexity, they have been reluctant to embrace new approaches or to take on possible confrontations.

In this issue we offer new perspectives on and probings into the domain hitherto known as "children's literature." We believe that the

time has come for this field of study to face a new set of questions which *cannot otherwise be dealt with so expediently*. Bearing this in mind, the study of children's literature must realize its potential contribution to cultural studies in general, and it will, we hope, evolve into a singular, independent, and highly rewarding object of study. Children's literature presents a range of provocative and, to our minds, highly productive questions concerning the *history of culture and cultural mechanisms*. One might even go so far as to say that no other sphere of cultural studies approximates quite such a vast scope of cultural issues as does children's literature.

Belonging *simultaneously* to the literary and the socio-educational systems, it is the only cultural field whose products purposefully address two antithetical audiences, catering to the needs and expectations of both. Children's literature evolved from the convergence of and interaction among several cultural fields or systems, of which the most prominent are the social, the educational, and the literary systems. Any interest in observing the complexity of such reciprocal cultural relationships, or in examining the mechanisms and dynamics thereof, will be rewarded by the study of children's literature, which has recently raised some most promising issues. Few, if any, cultural fields have come about as the result of, and despite, quite so many cultural constraints as has children's literature. Consequently, no other field is able to examine cultural mechanisms, manipulations, and processes in quite the same way as children's literature. Some excellent studies of childhood, children's culture, and children's literature, published in recent years, attest, we believe, to the overwhelming potential contained in the study of children's literature.

As is clearly demonstrated by these recent studies, which include contributions to this issue, inquiry into children's literature proffers a whole new cultural perspective, based on a newly discovered body of primary works that has yet to be academically examined, and new, different methodological approaches whereby this body of knowledge may be apprehended.

The papers published in this issue converge around some of the more pertinent questions raised in past research on children's literature, with the intention of reexamining what have become accepted tenets: the emergence of children's literature and the demarcation of boundaries between adult and children's literature; the process whereby the network or system of books for children was established; the linkage between societal concepts and children's literature; and the textual implications as well as the textual manipulations thereof. These problems and questions are reopened in this issue, occasionally in thought-provoking and innovative ways.

Contributions to this issue also reflect the current state of the art

of the field, indicating mainly the future range of new issues and directions likely to be addressed. The extent to which our final accomplishments match the ambition of their conception depends entirely on us as scholars of children's literature. There is, however, a price to pay for being new and untried: the pioneering nature of this new field of study means that current research cannot hope to guarantee immediate and long-lasting answers. We are well aware that some working hypotheses will fail to be confirmed; others will require modification, while still others will pave the way toward progress. As things stand, all we currently have to offer is the hope of generating a lively, provocative, and stimulating field of inquiry in the coming decades.

The idea of publishing a special issue on children's literature was first suggested during a conference at Tel Aviv University in December 1988 on "Children's Literature between Literary Norms and Societal Constraints." The conference was organized by the School of Cultural Studies in cooperation with the Goethe Institute, and the publication of this issue, which includes some of the conference papers, was generously supported by the Goethe Institute in Tel Aviv and its director at the time, Mr. Johannes Weissart. This idea was further encouraged by participants in a September 1989 conference held in Salamanca and organized by the International Research Society of Children's Literature (IRSCL). Without doubt, the international nature of this organization greatly enhanced the prospects of exchange and interaction between scholars of children's literature. It is the IRSCL which we have to thank for the international nature of this issue as well. We hope that this issue will, in turn, generate worldwide interest in children's literature as a future locus of inquiry into the semiotics of culture.

This issue would not have been possible without the initiative and enthusiastic support of the Tel Aviv University Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, for which I am most grateful. I would also like to thank Sonja Laden for her indispensable help in editing this issue.