

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Zohar Shavit, *Tel Aviv* Editor's Introduction 1

Creating the Boundaries

Mary E. Shaner,
Massachusetts at Boston Instruction and Delight:
Medieval Romances as Children's
Literature 5

Sécolène Le Men,
*C.N.R.S. (Musée d'Orsay),
Paris* Mother Goose Illustrated: From
Perrault to Doré 17

Creating the System

Zohar Shavit,
Tel Aviv Literary Interference between
German and Jewish-Hebrew
Children's Literature during the
Enlightenment: The Case of
Campe 41

Brenda Dunn-Lardeau,
Quebec at Montreal The Shaping of a National
Identity through History and
Hagiography in *Notre Légende
dorée* (Montreal, 1923) 63

Rita Bouckaert-
Ghesquière,
*Catholic University,
Leuven* Cinderella and Her Sisters 85

Maija Lehtonen,
Helsinki

The Novel for Young Adults in
Finland 97

Societal Concepts and Children's Literature

Gertrud Lehnert,
Bonn

The Training of the Shrew: The
Socialization and Education of
Young Women in Children's
Literature 109

Margaret R. Higgonnet,
Connecticut

Civility Books, Child Citizens,
and Uncivil Antics 123

Anne Scott MacLeod,
Maryland

From Rational to Romantic: The
Children of Children's Literature
in the Nineteenth
Century 141

Jean Perrot,
Paris Nord

Pan and *Puer Aeternus*:
Aestheticism and the Spirit of the
Age 155

Textual Implications

Hans-Heino Ewers,
Frankfurt

Children's Literature and the
Traditional Art of
Storytelling 169

Walter Pape,
Cologne

Happy Endings in a World of
Misery: A Literary Convention
between Social Constraints and
Utopia in Children's and Adult
Literature 179

Textual Manipulations

Richard Wunderlich,
College of St. Rose, NY

The Tribulations of *Pinocchio*:
How Social Change Can Wreck a
Good Story 197

Nitsa Ben-Ari,
Tel Aviv

Didactic and Pedagogic
Tendencies in the Norms
Dictating the Translation of
Children's Literature: The Case
of Postwar German-Hebrew
Translations 221

Basmat Even-Zohar,
Open University, Tel Aviv

Reinbert Tabbert,
*College of Higher
Education, Schwäbisch
Gmünd, Germany*

Translation Policy in Hebrew
Children's Literature: The Case
of Astrid Lindgren 231

The Surprising Career of Wolf
Spillner's *Wild Geese*: A Case
Study of East German
Literature 247

Notes on Contributors 259

Editor's Introduction

Zohar Shavit

Poetics and Comparative Literature, Tel Aviv

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.