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with my
admiration
Sue Dingle

Review Essay: Recent Scholarship in Children's Literature, 1980 to the Present

Maria M. Tatar. *Off With Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Pp. xxvii + 295. \$24.95

Ruth K. MacDonald. *Literature for Children in England and America from 1646 to 1774* (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1982). Pp. 204. \$15

Geoffrey Summerfield. *Fantasy and Reason: Children's Literature in the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984). Pp. 315. \$30

Mary V. Jackson. *Engines of Instruction, Mischief, and Magic: Children's Literature in England from its Beginnings to 1839* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). Pp. 304. \$39.50, 16.50 paper

Bette P. Goldstone. *Lessons to be Learned: A Study of Eighteenth Century English Didactic Children's Literature* (New York & Bern: Peter Lang, 1984). Pp. 232. \$26.50

Rüdiger Steinlein. *Die domestizierte Phantasie: Studien zur Kinderliteratur, Kinderlektüre und Literaturpädagogik des 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1987). Pp. 275. DM 124, DM 96 paper

Samuel F. Pickering, Jr. *Moral Instruction and Fiction for Children, 1749-1820* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1993). Pp. xi + 214. \$35

Kirsten Drotner. *English Children and Their Magazines, 1751-1945* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1988). Pp. x + 272. \$32

James Herbert Davis, Jr. *The Happy Island: Images of Childhood in the Eighteenth-Century French "Théâtre d'Éducation"* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987). Pp. 195. \$31.50

Ruth K. MacDonald. *Christian's Children: The Influence of John Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress" on American Children's Literature* (Bern & New York: Peter Lang, 1989). Pp. xiii + 208. \$35.10

Marina Warner. *The Absent Mother, or Women against Women in the 'Old Wives' Tale* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991). Pp. 58.

Jacqueline Rose. *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993). Pp. xvii + 181. \$12.95 paper

Peter Hunt. *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991). Pp. 236. \$35

[Maria Edgeworth]. *The Little Dog Trusty: The Orange Man; and the Cherry Orchard: Being the Tenth Part of Early Lessons* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1990). Unpagged. \$8 paper

Children's literature is an academic subject still in search of an identity. How long has it existed? What are its antecedents? Can adults understand it? Conversely, can children comprehend texts composed by adults? Is children's literature a true genre, with an identifiable poetics to mark and define its borders?

The abundant and thought-provoking scholarship that has appeared since 1980 would seem to assume a "yes" response to each of these queries; yet they remain largely unresolved even as analysis proceeds, for the academic study of children's literature has had both to define and to study itself at the same time. To a certain extent, contemporary issues in children's literature are artifacts of its newness. It is, above all, an open field, one that is evolving quickly and is still seeking its outer limits.

Writing for children has existed, some say, since Sumer, but it has been most copiously in evidence since the introduction of print. One of the first examples appeared in 1473, a Latin reader with figuratively told Bible stories and pungently stated reminders of their meaning for everyday life. It was Petrus Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*, a book of Bible stories that in manuscript form had already been educating and socializing Latin-school pupils for two hundred years. Its instructional, and occasionally imaginative, text accurately represents the pedagogical uses to which writing for the young would be put for centuries to come. We have come to think of nineteenth-century masterpieces of fantasy like *Alice in Wonderland* as archetypal classics of children's literature, but they were purposeful departures from a longstanding convention: literature for children was preponderantly a mill for grinding out socially useful habits and spiritually helpful virtues.

The first stage of writing about children's books chronicled and celebrated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing for children in useful bibliographies like Harvey Darton's *Children's Books in England* (third edition 1982) and d'Alté Welch's *Bibliography of American Children's Books Printed Prior to 1821* (1972) that summarized what was then known of the publishing history of children's books.¹ Together with more recent guides to national and international collections of children's books, these still provide a basic inventory.

Until the 1970s, children's literature remained anchored academically in departments of librarianship and teacher-training, whose guiding concerns were the thematic and stylistic suitability of individual books for specific age groups and children's actual reception of those books. When the first institute for the study of children's literature was inaugurated in Germany in the 1970s, one prominent scholar recently reminisced, only four analytic studies of children's literature

existed in German,² a situation that typified conditions for the study of children's literature everywhere in the western world.

Within the last two decades all that has changed. The field where only bibliographic and bibliophilic appreciations of juvenile rarities once grew has become a well-tended garden with many varieties of inquiry. The change was so sudden that it requires some explanation, which is to be found in the Continental student rebellions of 1968.

When European students began their summer semesters in the spring of 1968, they rebelled violently against a traditionally rigid hierarchalization both of knowledge and of academic personnel. The clash between students and academic institutions closed down many universities for a time; more significantly, the resolutions of conflict, like student representation in university governance, were frequently revolutionary in their impact. The fact and the pace of change gave courage to those who doubted received truths about their societies. Traditional constellations of power diminished and received truths of all sorts came under close scrutiny. Attention turned to the German primary educational system, and in a sudden wave of outrage, one book after another not only attacked it, but also questioned traditional forms of children's literature. In Germany, a previously invulnerable truth had been the belief that fairy tales embodied a valid, supraconfessional, and socially transcendent means of teaching social and religious values to children. Now these same fairy tales were roundly denounced.

These were the cradle conditions for the academic study of children's literature, and one consequence was that it imprinted one of Germany's two schools of children's literature—the Frankfurt school—with a profoundly revisionist stamp in its early years.³ Jack Zipes introduced revisionist German concepts into the United States in two influential polemics, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (1979) and *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (1983). These two books established a skeptical climate of opinion, which fostered revisionist feminist and psychoanalytic studies.

A second German school of children's literature was also in the process of formation in the 1970s, in Cologne. With a distinctly historical orientation, its team set about preparing a reference work for German-language and German-imprint children's literature between 1750 and 1800.⁴ On the surface the project seemed simple and straightforward, but in the course of gathering material for the 1750–1800 period, which had long been believed to represent the birthing of children's literature, the Cologne scholars unearthed such quantities of writing for children from the fifteenth century onward that they enlarged and radically redefined the genre to include books of instruction (conduct, religion, rhetoric) along with the traditional canon of fictional works. The dramatic result of their redefinition was to add three centuries to the period of time in which children's literature (Kinder- und Jugendliteratur) might be studied. The American scholar of Renaissance studies, Warren W. Wooden, similarly recognized the importance of Renaissance antecedents to eighteenth-century children's literature at an early point, but his untimely death delayed the publication of his essays, which have recently become available.⁵

The study of children's literature in the United States has been far more influenced by developments in Germany than it has been by scholarship in England. More than anything else this probably reflects the superior status of children's literature in Central Europe: Germany has two well-developed and finely staffed academic institutes devoted solely to children's literature (Cologne and Frankfurt) as well as several influential professorships. Britain, on the other hand, has but one academic slot for English children's literature. Institutional

backing is paramount in the creation of influence, and the fact that English theory and criticism are finally gaining a coherent identity abroad through the efforts of its single professor of children's literature, Peter Hunt, demonstrates the point.

Children's Literature Scholarship and the New Historicism

It is possible to understand nearly all the scholarship in children's literature from 1980 onward as the outcome of quintessentially contextualized readings. That is because modern scholarship in children's literature has come of age in a period in which large numbers of sociohistorical studies tangential to children and books were published. The work of Lawrence Stone, Philippe Ariès, and Lloyd de Mause proved powerfully persuasive and engendered a harsh view of the historical experience of childhood, a view that provided the dominant point of departure for many scholars.⁶ Few writers voiced skepticism. One, however, was Fred Inglis, who challenged de Mause's gloomy version of past child-rearing and labeled his concomitant celebration of modern methods and results as "an extravagant version of the popular belief that history simply provides us with the materials of self-congratulation."⁷ Two years later, the historian Linda Pollack published *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* and documented the tender, often perplexed, and always concerned feelings recorded by loving parents in diaries and letters in the early modern period.⁸ And in 1989 the German literary historian Hans-Heino Ewers produced a volume, *Kindheit als poetische Daseinsform*, that counterbalanced Ariès' pessimism about the past with the eighteenth-century child-utopia writings of Herder, Jean Paul, Novalis, and Tieck.⁹ Studies like Pollack's and Ewers' complicate the subject of childhood, as did the 1979 Berlin exhibit, "The Social Reality of Children in the Arts" and the 1985 study of the child in Western literature, *Corruption in Paradise*.¹⁰ The history of childhood, as opposed to what adults have said about children, has yet to be written, as Keith Thomas so accurately points out in an essay in Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs' *Children and Their Books*.¹¹

Revisionist History

Maria Tatar's *Off With Their Heads!* (1992) is doubly revisionist in that she pairs her announced purpose, to take the child-reader's side, with an undertaking to demonstrate that Bruno Bettelheim's *Uses of Enchantment* is a prime example of thinly disguised parental (or adult) self-interest. Adults, she says, prefer psychoanalytic interpretation of fairy tales, because of the ease with which they can use it to invert the meaning of the tales' surface message. For example, the plot of "Hansel and Gretel" faults the adult world in telling that the children, abandoned by their parents, fell prey to a cannibalistic witch. By introducing and assigning a set of "equivalent" meanings to plot components, Bettelheim turns the tale inside out and upside down and demonstrates that "Hansel and Gretel" actually communicates children's terror of abandonment and fear not of the witch's unnatural appetites but of their *own* oral greed. In this manner, a tale that delineates adult transgressions can be reformulated to position the child as transgressor. Tatar finds Bettelheim's thought "deeply symptomatic of our own culture's thinking about children . . . and acculturation of children [in] a canon that uncritically perpetuates the cultural legacy defined by Freud" (pp. xxv-vi).

Tatar believes that fairy tales and nursery rhymes offer a pedagogy of fear (pp. 22ff.) that is especially pointed where girls and women are concerned. Nowhere is this so clearly the case as in tales of domestic incest like "Catskin" or of conjugal violence like "Bluebeard" (pp. 94ff. and 120ff.). But Tatar points out that "[n]o fairy-tale text is sacred. Every printed version is just another variation on a theme—the rewriting of a cultural story in a certain time and place for a specific audience" (p. 229), a perception that introduces recent views in European folk narrative research on fairy tales to an American audience.

Histories of Children's Literature

These take a decidedly different tack. Charles Frey and John Griffith's *Literary Heritage of Childhood*, for instance, appraises and interprets children's classics in the Western tradition, as its subtitle states.¹² Yet other approaches have grown out of research results in publishing history,¹³ which has heightened awareness of and interest in instructional literature for children. Consumable, disposable books, printed on cheap paper and bound in flimsy cardboard, the content of these purpose-built books had an extraordinarily close fit with the unquestioned values and unassailable beliefs of succeeding ages. Tailored for one generation, they were inevitably anachronistic for the next. Their insubstantial construction meant they would need to be replaced within a few years, and with nearly every new printing came alterations to the text. *These* books don't demonstrate transcendent, supracultural truths about childhood and child-rearing; they show, instead, subtle temporal change from decade to decade and slow geographical transformation as individual books moved from presses in Boston to Worcester and then west to Buffalo and Albany or southwest to New London, New Haven, New York, and Philadelphia.

At one time critics considered only texts; now the size, heft, smell, feel, and look of a book have become meaningful exits from the object and entries into the cultural milieu of books for the historical child reader. Distribution and marketing processes are generally invisible to the reader of a single children's book, but a diachronic study of a single text highlights alterations to many parts of a book. Contents change and so does typography (what *does* the printer italicize for emphasis or ease of visual retrieval?); variation in addresses to the reader, parent, or teacher indicate variations in the readership anticipated by one publisher after another; modifications of bindings and paper quality suggest shifts in the class of intended buyers envisaged by publisher-printers. Historical texts, embedded in the material book, can be examined for minute and socially definable variations in attitudes toward children, because each of these alterations conditions the significance of any textual shifts that accompany them. Alas, such books are also among the most fugitive and ephemeral products of the press, often the least accessible of all forms of children's literature, because the most frequently destroyed in the process of daily use, but here and there they exist in a treasured mother lode.



In a field so young that nearly all of its commonly accepted markers are still being moved about, periodization is still taking shape. Continental historians of children's literature often begin with Comenius' *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* of 1658.¹⁴ Most

American and English histories, however, bow toward Caxton's *Aesop* but begin with John Locke, John Newbery, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.¹⁵ Ruth K. MacDonald set the publication of John Cotton's *Milk for Babes* and Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son* as the unconventional metes and bounds for her *Literature for Children in England and America from 1646 to 1774* (1982). MacDonald reminds us that "much of seventeenth-century children's verse was inspired by dissenters" (p. 28). This is her cue to locate the functional origins of writing for children in religious school books, like Cotton's *Milk for Babes*. Confessional distinctions, however, might interfere with commercial success, and so she points out that that pioneering entrepreneur of publishing for children, John Newbery, frequently sought to address a broad range of urban bookbuyers by including in his book titles a religiously tolerant phrase, "for children of all denominations" (p. 144).

MacDonald defines children's literature like a book historian, as part of a culture of leisure reading and of the production and consumption of printed material. She relates the emergence of the genre as a whole, as well as the appearance of individual books within the genre, to contemporaneous social, technological, economic, religious, and educational phenomena. She notes, for example, that "[a]verage family income [in eighteenth-century England] was £6 to £20 a year, and children's books usually cost from 4d. to 6d., so that only a relatively few families could afford them" (p. 11). One that could afford them no doubt sired the reader of Isaac Watts' "Praise for Mercies, Spiritual and Temporal," a child who must have lived in a comfortable and protected household, for who else could have identified with the following statement? "How many Children in the Street / Half naked I behold? / While I am cloth'd from Head to Feet, / And cover'd from the Cold . . ." (p. 35).

Eighteenth-century publishers knew their audiences. Small print-runs addressed small and identifiable buyerships, because large-scale homogeneous markets for print products had not yet developed. Secular advice to middle- and upper-class boys and girls, to servants, apprentices, and aristocrats constituted conduct books and courtesy literature, and publishers plied each group with pointedly relevant exhortations.



The history of reading has similarly provided data that conditions the way in which researchers read historical children's literature. How extensive was child literacy in the period when and in the place where a given book was published? Under what conditions might a given text have been apprehended? It might be read aloud or read privately. If read aloud, who read it? Father? Mother? Teacher? Governess? What effect on the child's comprehension of text did the locus and moment of apprehension produce? Whose "voice" might a child have heard? That of the adult or sibling who read aloud? That of the author (a sophistication hardly to be expected)?

By paying close attention to what children actually read—by their own account—Geoffrey Summerfield tacitly and implicitly ranges his understanding of children's literature with the empirical definition arrived at by the Cologne school of historical children's literature: what children *have* read and *do* read is children's literature. And what they have read, Summerfield shows us in his second chapter, included large numbers of chapbooks. Popular among eighteenth-century children and their elders, English chapbooks included stories like *St. George and the*

Dragon, Jack the Giant Killer, The Wandering Jew, The Seven Wise Men of Gotham, Guy Earl of Warwick, Parismus and Parismenus, Valentine and Orson, Jack Hickathrift, and Tom Thumb. John Locke, however, advocated a different literature for children, fables and certain Bible stories, in the letters he wrote to his friend Edward Clarke about the education of children. Locke's *Thoughts on Education* is for American, English, and Continental children's literature a formative essay, translated into French before the seventeenth century was out and repeatedly reprinted in English in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Fénelon's *Instructions for the Education of a Daughter*, written in 1687 and translated into English in 1707, offered much the same advice that Locke had. When children's literature began to issue from Newbery's presses in the middle of the eighteenth century, it self-consciously embodied Locke's (and Fénelon's) principles, but for Newbery's little books Summerfield has only scorn: "Where Locke was scrupulously attentive to the gradients, gradations and graduations of a child's evolving mind, Newbery—or the hack . . . pressed into his service—generalized in a remarkably bland, not to say, fatuous, manner" (p. 82). With sometimes disingenuous outrage, Summerfield chronicles eighteenth-century attempts to displace childhood fantasy with stories of reason and utility.

Summerfield also charts a set of mutually contradictory transformations in religiously based views of the nature of children in the course of the eighteenth century. Locke had, in his *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690), articulated a conviction that the newborn human mind represented neutral potential, neither inherently good nor created evil, but rendered good or evil by the experiences to which it was exposed. By the end of the eighteenth century two opposing views contended with Locke and with one another: the first, an extension of Locke's own views, claimed a near-divine goodness for the child; the second contradicted Locke and reasserted the presence of the Old Adam in the new child. It was a face-off between Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" (1785) and Hannah More's moralizing strictures. Both survived into the nineteenth century, and both made themselves felt in distinct children's literatures, one for the comfortably well-off, the other for the poor.



In *Engines of Instruction, Mischief, and Magic* (1989), Mary V. Jackson examines roughly the same eighteenth-century period as Summerfield; she was struck not so much by the conflict between fantasy and reason as by a sudden, post-1789, shift in public attitudes toward one specific fantasy, that of upward mobility. The early histories of orphans like Goody Two-Shoes and Primrose Pretty-Face, who rose to wealth against great personal and social odds, were emblematic of the "sort of tale . . . [that were] most loathed, and more tellingly, feared by political conservatives like Trimmer, Fenn, and More" (p. 127). English aristocrats, with the blood of France's nobility fresh in their memory, saw tales like these as potentially destabilizing and dangerously subversive. Fear of tumbrels and of the guillotine forced a sudden reformulation of the English literary promise of palpable rewards for manifest virtue in children's literature. No coach and six awaited post-Revolutionary Goody Two-Shoes avatars; instead they were made to express a submissive earthly contentment with their lot that signalled recompense in the hereafter, not in the here and now, a message that the Society for the Encouragement of Good Servants (founded in 1789!) undoubtedly applauded.

Overtly Didactic Literature for Children

In 1971 the German Dieter Richter asserted that literature for the young performed a socializing function in the material and notional realm for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bourgeois child.¹⁶ At the time—just three years after the 1968 German student revolutions—the statement continued a train of contentious challenges to received authority, but a number of studies have confirmed and elaborated his hypothesis. One of the first was Bettina Hurrelmann's study of Christian Felix Weiss' children's magazine during the six-year period 1776–82,¹⁷ and by the late 1980s there was general recognition that most historical (and much contemporary) children's literature has served and continues to serve a normative purpose.¹⁸ As a result, a number of detailed studies have appeared that investigate the precise nature of the virtues that literature has sought to inculcate, the gender boundaries of virtue and vice that it has delineated, and the rhetorical means by which authors have sought to communicate their view of the world. Even nursery rhymes help children learn cultural lessons:

Lyer Lyer Lickspit
Turn about the
Candlestick.
What's good for Lyers?
Brimstone and fire.¹⁹

In her examination of eighteenth-century didactic books, *Lessons to be Learned*, Bette Goldstone unites four distinct undertakings: biography, reader response, literary analysis of the books themselves, and publishing history. Usually dismissed as impossibly moralizing, eighteenth-century didactic authors here emerge in new colors. John Wesley and Hannah More, she reminds us, both believed that children were tainted by original sin. For them, this position represented a repudiation of prevailing attitudes among educated Englishmen who had read Locke and Rousseau; but the poor, for whom they wrote much of their didactic literature, had remained relatively unaffected by revised eighteenth-century Enlightenment views of the child and still adhered to a harsh Calvinistic model (pp. 82–83), which theoretically at least, helped accomplish a friction-free reception of the *Cheap Repository Tracts* and other improving pamphlets. Goldstone considers in some detail the publishing history of the five didactic books she treats: *The Life and Perambulations of a Mouse* (1783?), *Jemima Placid* (1785?), *Fabulous Histories* (1786), *Evenings at Home* (1792–96), and *The Parent's Assistant* (1796), which together went through 193 printings with sixty-eight different publishing houses (pp. 95–137).



Rüdiger Steinlein treats the didacticism of the eighteenth century from a different angle, as part of a process of harnessing and guiding childhood fantasy. Beginning with the dangers posed by unsupervised private reading, Steinlein reviews the eighteenth-century literature of the problematic of reading. Many German educators in that period believed that unsupervised reading lent itself all too easily to masturbation, a danger they attacked in both veiled and in direct language. Non-utilitarian reading threatened health, morals, and, by making inroads on working hours, worldly success. Fiction for children suffered attacks

from other quarters, too: religious devotees of the "truth" like the Quakers denounced novels for children and for adults as "false fictions." Only in the last years of the eighteenth century did a few German pedagogues, influenced perhaps by early Romantics, acknowledge a rôle for fantasy in children's personal lives and individual development. Thus, child-reading habits at the end of the eighteenth century were strung tautly between censorious denunciations of reading-as-contamination and Romantic exhortations to nurture and develop the life of the imagination (pp. 62ff.).



The most sustained examination of didactic intent and realization in English children's literature has come from the pen of Samuel Pickering, Jr. His earlier study, *John Locke and Children's Books in Eighteenth Century England* (1981), led him to conclude that it was "impossible to exaggerate the influence of Locke's writings upon eighteenth century thought in general and upon educational thought in particular" where they became "practically Biblical" (p. 9) both in England and on the continent. In *The Moral Tradition in English Fiction, 1785–1850* (1976), he had discussed the moral writings of Mrs. Barbauld and Mrs. Trimmer. In *Moral Instruction and Fiction for Children*, Pickering assumes the purpose of children's literature to have been rigorously instructional and sets out to delineate the moral values that English and American children's literature sought to inculcate and the means by which their authors communicated the social import of virtuous habits. Obedience, truth-telling, and loyalty succeed, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century children learned, if only because their opposites so palpably and demonstrably fail. In the stories that Pickering analyzes, disobedient, lying, and treacherous children, if they are rich, squander their fortunes in gambling or drink and lose their lives in duels; if they are poor, they lose their jobs, and then starve, sicken, and die an early and miserable death.

Pickering notes the presence and influence of gender theory on the study of children's literature (pp. 43, 44, 48, 61) and pursues it himself. For example, in drawing out the treatment of lying in children's books, he provides enough examples so that the reader is able to conclude that girls and boys were generally subject to entirely different patternings of loyalty. In his examples boys regularly demonstrate peer loyalty, sometimes refusing to reveal the identity of a comrade or classmate who had stolen or lied; girls, however, fit into a pattern of vertical associations and loyalties: "the girl who informed upon classmates or threatened to do so was the voice of a rigorous and lifesaving morality, not a spy or a tell-tale" (p. 169). Unlike Mary Jackson, who notes an abrupt change in social attitudes after 1789, Samuel Pickering finds a fundamental continuity in the treatment of moral values between 1750 and 1820.

Special Studies Within Children's Literature

Before Kirsten Drotner's *English Children and Their Magazines, 1751–1945* there was no broad history of children's magazines. As always we find John Newbury in at the beginning. In this case, it was with his *Lilliputian Magazine*, which existed in three issues in 1751 and 1752. It was a small but fat little pocketbook, with a variety of offerings: songs, stories, and verse, much like a modern children's annual.

Hence its title, "Magazine," with the French meaning of "warehouse" or "emporium."

Initially such magazines were "aimed at children of the gentry and of the affluent merchant bourgeoisie" (p. 22) and had, therefore, a far smaller circulation than chapbooks, but the religious revival of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced legions of moral magazines for children. With evocative subtitles, like *The Sunday Scholar's Reward*, with chapbook format and pricing, subsidized by wealthy patrons, and distributed by earnest clergymen, chapbooks like the *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795–98) and the offerings of the Religious Tract Society were distributed in millions of copies in the last years of the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth centuries.

Drotner's investigation of children's magazines begins to approach a study of childhood, in that it obliquely addresses categorically child-centered issues: what was it that children preferred in juvenile magazines and that they disdained or disliked in "quality" or "superior" magazines, as their contemporaries called them?



James Davis analyzes the eighteenth-century *théâtre d'éducation*, whose ultimate goal was "the achievement of happiness, the assurance of tranquility designed to benefit the young person's body, mind, and heart" (p. 141). Social class, of course, plays an enormous rôle in such a study, although Davis does not explore it in any detail. By its very nature eighteenth-century theatre for children was a luxurious undertaking, purchased at an expense unimaginable to the child-viewer. The privilege on which theatrical entertainment was founded must have resonated with its viewers' daily experience, and it certainly resounded in the lines spoken by the actors:

The young protagonist of *Les Moineux* . . . is a pert and impudent seven-year-old whose answer to a tutor who threatens to reveal his incorrigible behavior is perhaps natural though unexpected: " . . . Si vous dites à Maman . . . si vous le dites, moi, je lui dirai ce que j'ai vu l'autre jour, par le trou de la serrure, quand vous étiez dans la chambre d'Hélène . . . " (p. 12)

Davis notes the sexual precocity of this seven-year-old with good reason, but he does not address the social arrogance it reveals in its upper-class protagonist. It is a significant omission, however, because class-based features are salient, perhaps central, in children's literature in the eighteenth century, not only in the limited world of the French *théâtre d'éducation* but also in much European fiction, song, and religious instruction for children.



In *Christian's Children*, Ruth MacDonald examines the plot and structure of *Pilgrim's Progress* and concludes that it fits the literary paradigm for the European fairy tale. *Pilgrim's Progress*, reputed to be an immediate sales phenomenon in the adult market, was edited as a text for children toward the end of the eighteenth century. It survived into the nineteenth in frequently bowdlerized form, and spiritually and literarily it fathered three nineteenth-century offspring, according

to MacDonald: Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* (1850), Martha Finley Farquharson's *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867), and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868–69).

MacDonald's analysis touches on a number of important issues in book history and children's literature. First and foremost is the simple definition of a text, 1) when it takes as many forms as had *Pilgrim's Progress* and 2) when it also serves as a prototype plot; second is the problem posed by fluidity in the boundary separating adult and children's literature; third is reader response, which MacDonald attempts to deal with but more frequently assumes and asserts; and fourth, publishing practices like pirating, so ably practiced by Isaiah Thomas in eighteenth-century Worcester: he appropriated many of John Newbery's English children's books, and introduced the *Christian Pilgrim* to American readers in 1798 (pp. 137–42).



Marina Warner's brief study of *The Absent Mother* (1991), the published version of a set of lectures presented at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, understands the fatal isolation of mothers and the functionally parallel jealous competition among sisters as the narrative reflection of real social and economic conditions. Deprived of their dowries, aged widows were often marginalized and young women had to compete with one another for the security offered by man and marriage. Warner's writings suggest nuanced ways in which fairy tales may be viewed as historical documents, and she uses them carefully to good effect.

Theory and Poetics of Children's Literature

There have been no first principles of children's literature as in canonical literature, no foundational Aristotelian unities. The first systematic effort to identify and analyze "universal structural traits and patterns common to all children's literature" appeared in Zohar Shavit's seminal *Poetics of Children's Literature*.²⁰ Another is Joanne M. Golden's *Narrative Symbol in Children's Literature: Explorations in the Construction of Text*,²¹ which applies Kenneth Burke's pentad (scene, agent, act, agency, purpose) to children's literature. Two collections of critical writings have also appeared: Robert Bator's *Signposts to Criticism of Children's Literature* (1983) and Peter Hunt's *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism* (1990).²²

Along with the potentially "objective" facts offered by histories of the family, the book, and reading habits, some recent scholars of children's literature have also posited a series of highly subjective contexts that determine the outcome of the act of reading. Literary critics immersed in psychohistory and developmental psychology²³ have distinguished between child- and adult-readings of texts. Sophisticated readings of Freud's views on childhood have compounded the problematic of child-versus-adult readings of children's literature by engendering a view of multiply layered adult readings of children's literature that are said to arise from the multiple personae that theoretically coexist within a single adult reader: the surviving child that inhabits the adult mind, the gendered reader, the citizen reader, the moralist. It was inevitable that doubt would be cast on the possibility for any adult, parent, or critic to "read" children's literature, as does Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan* (1984):

Children's fiction is impossible . . . in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child. Children's fiction is clearly about that relation, but it has the remarkable characteristic of being about something which it hardly ever talks of. Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between. (pp. 1-2)

Rose similarly questions the entire project of adult writing for children. As a revisionist in her approach as Jack Zipes, she sees adults repeating (rather than imposing, as does Zipes) their own psychic and experiential constitutions on the young. Underlying her argument is an unarticulated assumption: that each child (ought to) be allowed to construct itself *de novo*, existentially unconstrained by its environment and by the social expectations of its elders. This untenably utopian ideal underlies much of her thought; nonetheless she gives voice to the most considered psycho-social response to children's literature in the field today.

Probably the single most useful set of theoretical reflections on children's literature currently available, Peter Hunt's *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (1991) incorporates every major theme that has been discussed above. Hunt, who envisages *real* readers with *real* books in the *real* world, fields corresponding questions about reading and books that have entered into literary criticism within the last decade. What did a book look and feel like? What comprised its peritext? What function did graphic embellishments and white space serve? How did the publisher's blurb prepare the reader for the text that followed?

Theory, Hunt says, "generally deals with distinctions generated by the analytic methods used (rather than those residing in the texts), and by the ideology of the discriminators" (pp. 73-74). This invalidates existing literary theory for application to children's literature, if one considers writing for children, as Hunt does, a complex process of cultural translation from the adult writer to the child reader. Nor is existing literary theory able to explain the powerful attraction of "the sacred texts of childhood, whose authors had not forgotten what it was like to be a child," as Alison Lurie puts it.²⁴ Good children's literature, as the French critic Isabelle Jan said, "should evoke the world of childhood."²⁵

An appropriate critical literary theory for children's literature, according to Hunt, would examine some of the theoretical difficulties posed by child comprehension of adult-authored texts, and it would require a shift in orientation, from "adultist" to "childist." Taken to their logical conclusion, Hunt's and Rose's views about intergenerational incomprehension lead inexorably to the conclusion that many adult critical readings of children's literature, as well as most children's attempts to comprehend adult-composed children's literature, are futile exercises. Supremely logical, this contradicts quotidian observation. It is possible to say something intelligent about children's literature, and children *do* derive pleasure from many of the books written for them. Having dealt with this conundrum, though not conclusively, Hunt proceeds to define children's literature, to discuss the decoding of texts, the importance of literary style and linguistic register, and permissible levels of plot complexity in children's books. How critics of children's literature can "cross the gap, to see what is really happening on the child's terms, rather than continue dealing in ingrained assumptions about children's perceptions and competences" (p. 192) will long remain a problem, but now that Hunt has articulated the gap, critics will be well advised to reflect on the ambiguities and limits of intergenerational comprehension before making suppositions about the meaning of children's literature for its readers.

Text Reprints

After considering the history and interpretation of three centuries of children's literature, it is enlightening, indeed it is great fun, to hold these small books in the hand. Their supple paper, large letters, and clear typography bespeak a set of industrial processes and domestic habits long past. Such books are such rarities that very few scholars and hardly any students may share that pleasure. But photomechanical reproductions go a long way toward recreating the sense of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century children's book. Thus the Clark Library reprint of Maria Edgeworth's moral stories is doubly welcome. We have the *look* of the 1801 page, as we often do in an illustration, but better than that, we can read whole stories for ourselves. Who can resist one that begins with these words:

Very, very little children must not read this story; for they cannot understand it: they will not know what is meant by a liar and a boy of truth. Very little children, when they are asked a question, say "yes" and "no," without knowing the meaning of the words; but you, children, who can speak quite plain, and who can tell, by words, what you wish for, and what you want, and what you have seen, and what you have done; you who understand what is meant by the words "I have done it," or "I have not," you may read this story; for you can understand it.

The little story's transparent syntax and unambiguous language "let them know the difference between a liar and a boy of truth," as the small book concludes. This reprint, introduced by Mitzi Myers, is a gem.

A major reprint effort was Garland's 1970s series of sixty-five classics of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century children's literature. It was expensive and is, alas, now out of print, but its presence on several hundred American library shelves is a national resource to complement major rare book holdings. In addition, a few eighteenth- and nineteenth-century chapbook tales for children were reproduced in *The Penny Histories*, introduced by Victor E. Neuberg.²⁶

Concluding Thoughts

Within the group of books reviewed here, several significant characteristics emerge. Most of the studies are concerned with one or more varieties of reader response, yet in some cases, we are served up only an undifferentiated and generic child. That was not the case for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors and booksellers, who often designated their intended readership with subtitles like "a book for the educated" or "for the use of country children," for which one may read, "the uneducated poor." Family financial resources determined not only the binding ordered for children's books, and—until about 1850—the text inside that binding, but frequently whether or not a child read at all.²⁷ Disinterest in, or ignorance of, class in pre-twentieth-century children's literature has severely limited critics' ability to situate both the style and content of the text they examine, but that situation is abruptly changing with the appearance of volumes like *Stories and Society: Children's Literature in its Social Context* and *Theories of Class in Children's Literature*.²⁸

One unacknowledged, but widespread, assumption about children's literature that surfaces in several of these studies concerns the text itself. Which text is meant when a critic discusses *Robinson Crusoe* or *Pilgrim's Progress*? This is not an idle inquiry about variant forms involving a few verbal disparities, but a query about the

degree of reworking to which a text has been subjected. In the case of books written specifically for children, textual change in the course of pirating deserves recognition and further examination. One may not, for example, assume that British and American printings of identically titled books contain identical text, for some American editions reveal subtle forms of American-ness.

My final observation deals with the potential for the history of children's literature to supply a new set of sources for the history of childhood. Historians constantly search for new sources or for new ways of utilizing old sources. The results often hinge on historians' understanding of genre-specific conventions, the absence of which may fatally flaw their conclusions. Can historical texts written by adults for children's consumption be used as sources for the social history of childhood, with a straightforward transfer of fictional facts (plot, characterization, depiction of interpersonal relationships, etc.) to historical reality? Not reliably. But the assumptions that underlie the fictional facts can often be identified and can be revelatory for historians as well as for literary critics, as in Mary Jackson's recognition that the rags-to-riches plot disappeared from English children's literature after the French Revolution. Jackson's work suggests the benefits of a fresh awareness of the historical context in which individual works emerged.

These are the major directions in which contemporary scholarship in children's literature is proceeding. Disciplinary barriers are falling, change is fast, and international influence is strong, as new contributions contribute to both literary and historical studies.

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NOTES

1. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1982) and (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Soc., 1972), respectively.

2. Bettina Hurrelmann, "Stand und Aussichten der historischen Kinder- und Jugendliteraturforschung," in *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 17, no. 1 (1992): 105.

3. Both German schools of children's literature could currently be characterized as largely historical in their orientation, with children and the media a growing interest.

4. Theodor Brüggemann and Hans-Heino Ewers, eds., *Handbuch zur Kinder- und Jugendliteratur: Von 1750 bis 1800* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1982). Two additional vols. have since appeared: *Handbuch zur Kinder- und Jugendliteratur: Von Beginn des Buchdrucks bis 1570* (1987) and *Handbuch zur Kinder- und Jugendliteratur: Von 1570 bis 1750* (1991). A 4th vol. for the period 1800-50 is in preparation.

5. *Children's Literature of the English Renaissance*, ed. Jeanie Watson (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky, 1986).

6. Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1977); Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); de Mause, ed., *The History of Childhood* (N.Y.: Psychohistory Press, 1974).

7. *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1981), p. 80.

8. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1983).

9. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1989). See also Ewers' intro. to *Kinder- und Jugendliteratur der Romantik* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), pp. 7-58.

10. (Berlin: Elefanten Press, 1979) and Reinhard Kuhn, *Corruption...* (Hanover, N.H.: Univ. Press of New England, 1982), respectively.

11. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

12. *The Literary Heritage of Childhood: An Appraisal of Children's Classics in the Western Tradition* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1987).

13. See the review essay by David A. Rawson, "New Questions and New Approaches in the Study of the 'History of the Book,'" *Eighteenth-Century Life* 15 [November 1991]: 103-12.

14. See *Handbuch zur Kinder- und Jugendliteratur: Von 1570 bis 1750*, col. 433-453, or Alfio Bertondini, *Letteratura popolare giovanile e fantastica* (Urbino: Quattro Venti, 1989), pp. 246ff.

15. See John Rowe Townsend, *Written for Children: An Outline of English Language Children's Literature* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965), pp. 17-46, or Robert Leeson, *Reading and Righting: The Past, Present and Future of Fiction for the Young* (London: Collins, 1985).

16. "Kinderbuch und politische Erziehung," in *Die heimlichen Erzieher*, ed. Dieter Richter & Jochen Vogt (Reinbek, 1974), p. 212; cited from Steinlein, p. 138.

17. *Jugendliteratur und Bürgerlichkeit. Soziale Erziehung in der Jugendliteratur der Aufklärung am Beispiel von Christian Felix Weiße "Der Kinderfreund" 1776-1782* (Paderborn, 1974).

18. See, e.g., the essays in Betty Bacon, ed., *How Much Truth Do We Tell the Children?* (Minneapolis: Marxist Education Press, 1988).

19. Quoted from Lucy Rollinn, *Cradle and All: A Cultural and Psychoanalytic Reading of Nursery Rhymes* (Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi, 1992), p. 105.

20. (Athens: Univ. of Georgia, 1986), p. xi.

21. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990).

22. (Chicago: American Library Assoc.) and (London: Routledge), respectively.

23. See Nicholas Tucker, *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1981), who is particularly concerned to understand the psychological appeal certain books have for their readers.

24. *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), p. x.

25. *On Children's Literature*, ed. Catherine Storr (N.Y.: Schocken, 1974), p. 143.

26. (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969).

27. See chap. 8, "Who reads children's books?" in Tucker, *The Child and the Book*.

28. (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1992) and *The Lion and the Unicorn* (December 1993), respectively.

