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For Grown-Ups Too

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The Surprising Depth and Complexity of Children's Literature

By Seth Lerer

Print

Ever since there were children, there has been children's literature. Long before John Newbery established the first press devoted to children's books, stories were told and written for the young, and books originally offered to mature readers were carefully recast or excerpted for youthful audiences. Greek and Roman educational traditions grounded themselves in reading and reciting poetry and drama. Aesop's fables lived for two millennia on classroom and family shelves. And thinkers from Quintilian to John Locke, from St. Augustine to Dr. Seuss, speculated on the ways in which we learn about our language and our lives from literature.

The history of children's literature is inseparable from the history of childhood, for the child was made through texts and tales he or she studied, heard, and told back. Learning how to read is a lifetime, and life-defining, experience. "We can remember," writes Francis Spufford in his exquisite memoir *The Child That Books Built*, "readings that acted like transformations. There were times when a particular book, like a seed crystal, dropped into our minds when they were exactly ready for it, like a supersaturated solution, and suddenly we changed."¹ Children's literature offers more than just a chronicle of forms of fiction or the arts of illustration. It charts the makings of the literate imagination. It shows children finding worlds within the book and books in the world. It addresses the changing environments of family life and human growth, schooling and scholarship, publishing and publicity in which children—at times suddenly, at times subtly—found themselves changed by literature.²

But what is childhood? Ever since French historian Philippe Ariès sought to define its modern form, scholars have sought to write its history. For Ariès, childhood was not some essential or eternal quality in human life but was instead a category of existence shaped by social mores and historical experience.

Childhood was not invented by the moderns—whether we associate them with John Locke, the Puritans, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Romantics, or the Victorians—but is a shifting category that has meaning in relationship to other stages of personal development and family life. Greeks and Romans, Byzantines and Anglo-Saxons, Renaissance and Revolutionary cultures all had clearly defined concepts of the child and, in turn, canons of children's literature. Children are or become, in the words of the 20th-century philosopher Marx Wartofsky, "what they are taken to be by others, and what they come to take themselves to be, in the course of their social communication and interaction with others."³ So, too, is children's literature: books that are taken into childhood, that foster social communication, and that, in their interaction with their readers, owners, sellers, and collectors, teach and please.

I am interested in the history of what children have heard and read. Their stories, poems, plays, or treatises may well have been composed with children in mind; or they may have been adapted for readers of different ages. I distinguish, therefore, between claims that children's literature consists of books written for children and that it consists of those read, regardless of original authorial intention, by children.

[A Matter of Interpretation](#)

At the beginning of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, the narrator recalls how, as a 6-year-old, he came across a picture of a boa constrictor swallowing an animal. "I pondered deeply," he remembers, and he made his own drawing. Showing it to the grown-ups, he asked if it frightened them, but they responded, "Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?" Of course, this was not a hat, but a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. The boy redrew the picture, showing the inside, but the grown-ups were not impressed. And so, the boy gave up a career as an artist. "Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them."⁴

This episode represents two ways of reading literature. On the one hand, we may look for what it seems to us; on the other, we may look for what its author meant it to be. The unimaginative will always see the ordinary in the strange, a hat where there may really be a snake digesting an elephant. Part of the challenge for the literary critic, therefore, is to balance authorial intention and reader response. But part of the challenge for the children's literary critic is to recognize that texts are mutable—that meanings change, that different groups of readers may see different things, and that what grown-ups find as ordinary items of experience may transform, in the child's imagination, into monstrous brilliance.

Some readers have found children's literature to be a rack of hats: didactic, useful books that keep us warm or guard us against weather. I find children's literature to be a world of snakes: seductive things that live in undergrowths and that may take us whole. Like the *Little Prince*, I have come upon volumes that have swallowed me. Children's literature is full of animals, whether they are the creatures who fill Aesop's old menagerie or the islands and continents of the colonial imagination. But they are also full of hats, from Crusoe's crude goatskin head covering to the red-and-white-striped topper that covers, only barely, the transgressions of Dr. Seuss's famous Cat. Each item is a subject of interpretation. Each becomes something of a litmus test for just what kind of reader we may be.

Studies of authorial intention have, over the past three decades, lost ground to histories of reception that show how the meaning of a literary work often lies in the ways in which it may be used, taught, read, excerpted, copied, and sold.⁵ Children's literature retells a history of the conventions of interpretation and the reception of texts in different historical periods. But children's literary works themselves take such a problem as a theme. Often, a book instructs the child in the arts of reading. It may tell tales about its own production, or it may—more figuratively—show us how we transform our lives into books and texts, making sense of signs and symbols, life and letters.

I am thus fascinated by the transformations of key books and authors over time. The trajectory of Aesop's fables, for example, writes a history of Western education, of family life, of languages, translations, manuscripts, printing, and digitization. The reception and recasting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, too, illustrates the changing visions of adventure and imagination, not just in the English-speaking countries and their colonies, but throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas. The schoolroom has remained the setting for children's literature from Greek and Roman antiquity to the present. St. Augustine recalled, in his *Confessions*, how he had to memorize parts of the *Aeneid* as a schoolboy. Medieval and Renaissance classrooms filled themselves with Aesop. Eighteenth-century girls found their experience recast in Sarah Fielding's *The Governess*, subtitled *The Little Female Academy*. Boys from Tom Brown to Harry Potter found their most imaginative adventures in the classroom, the library, or the playing field.

In the course of these tales, I find themes that mark defining moments in literary history. Lists and catalogs, for example, seem to govern everything from the excerpts of Homer in Hellenistic papyri, to the medieval and Renaissance alphabets, to Crusoe's inventories, Scrooge's double-entry bookkeeping, and the contents of the "great green room" of *Goodnight Moon*. Simply repeating lists of things—arranged alphabetically, chronologically, or topically—can offer unexpected associations. Every list is, potentially, a reckoning, and in the history of children's literature, lists offer an accountancy of growth. Children's books often illuminate or criticize an actuarial approach to life. What Scrooge learns in *A Christmas Carol*, for example, is to stop making accounts—to recognize that moral reckoning is not the same as monetary, and that inscription in the book of life is not to be confused with entries in the ledger. By contrast, many 20th-century children's books teach the idea of list-making. What is *Goodnight Moon* but a catalog of things: a list of properties both real and fanciful that mark the progress of the evening and

the passageway to sleep? Dr. Seuss transforms the list into a wild burlesque of reckoning itself, imagining an alphabet “on beyond zebra,” or a fauna far beyond the categories of Linnaean classification.⁶

If children’s literature seems full of lists, it also seems full of theater. The schoolroom from the age of St. Augustine to Shakespeare was a place of performance, as boys memorized, recited, and enacted classic texts and rhetorical arguments for the approval of the master. The playing fields of the Rugby School in England or the battlefields of Africa were, for the 19th century, great stages for the masculine imagination. Young women, too, put on their shows—but here, the audiences were more often domestic than martial. Spectacula theatra, the spectacle of theater, captivated young Augustine. It also captivated young Louisa May Alcott, who had aspired to an actress’s life and who began her *Little Women* with a little holiday play put on by the March sisters. The theater enticed Pinocchio, too, whose puppet life is derailed by the strange seductions of the showcase (the Disney version of the story even has its Fox, duded up like some vulpine David Belasco, sing, “An Actor’s Life for Me”), and part of my interest lies in the ways in which the literary child performs for others.

If there has been a theater of childhood, especially in the modern era, it has been due in large part to Shakespeare. Plays such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, characters such as Juliet and Ophelia, and figures such as Caliban had a great impact on the makings of children’s literature. Shakespeare was everywhere, and his figurations of the fairy world, his presentations of young boys and girls, and his imagination of the monstrous gave a texture to those works of children’s literature that aspired to high culture. By the mid-19th century, childhood itself could take on a Shakespearean cast: witness the popularity of Mary Cowden Clarke’s fanciful re-creations in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines*; witness Anne Shirley in L. M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*, acting out like Juliet; witness the weird soliloquies of Captain Hook, who comes off in J. M. Barrie’s play of *Peter Pan* as a Shakespearean *manqué*.

The world was a stage, but it also was a book, and in particular it was a book of nature. Technology and science had an impact on the child’s imagination long before the chemistry sets and Edison biographies of my own childhood. Medieval bestiaries, herbaries, and lapidaries often offered illustrated guides to God’s creation (each item pictured, described, and then allegorized into moral meaning). The great explorations of the 17th and 18th centuries prompted new places of imagined transport—there is a direct line from Crusoe’s island to Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*. In the 19th century, the work of Charles Darwin had a deep impress on the narratives of childhood. Did children now evolve? Could they devolve, by contrast, left to their own uncontrolled devices? And who knew whether and where new species would be found? From Charles Kingsley and Edward Lear, through Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells, to Dr. Seuss, the endless wonder of the world transformed itself into new creatures, new adventures, and new timelines of development.

Philology, the study of word histories, of medieval myths, finds its way into the children’s literary imagination, from the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales, through J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Middle Earth* and C. S. Lewis’s *Narnia*, to Philip Pullman’s Miltonic *His Dark Materials*. The tradition of the fairy tale is part and parcel of this philological tradition. The Grimms had originally begun to collect their *Märchen* as part of their larger project of recovering the sources of Germanic linguistic and literary culture. Tolkien, the Oxford etymologist, found sources for his magical vocabulary in the roots of English. There is a mystery to meanings in the dictionary, and fairy tales and folklore share in larger national and scholarly projects that imagine a childhood for the European peoples.

For a long time, what was not literature was the ephemeral, the popular, the feminine, the childish. National literary histories tended to ignore women writers, to slight the role of the popular press or the folktale, and to brush aside works of wide circulation that nonetheless did not seem to match the greatness of known authors. In response to these critical traditions, histories of children’s literature have tended in the opposite direction: instead of analyzing, they celebrate; instead of discriminating, they list.

A Golden Age?

We have long sought a golden age of children's literature.⁷ Yet there is no single golden age, no moment when the literature for and of children is better, more precise, or more effective than at any other moment. Children's literature is not some ideal category that a certain age may reach and that another may miss. It is instead a kind of system, one whose social and aesthetic value is determined out of the relationships among those who make, market, and read books. No single work of literature is canonical; rather, works attain canonical status through their participation in a system of literary values.⁸ At stake is not, say, why *Alice in Wonderland* is somehow better than the books of Mrs. Molesworth, or why the many imitations of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* never quite measure up to their famous model. What is at stake, instead, is how successive periods define the literary for both children and adults, and how certain works and authors were established in the households, schools, personal collections, and libraries of the time.

If the history of children's literature builds on current cultural and theoretical concerns, it also speaks to commerce. Even before Newbery set up shop in the mid-18th century, there was a book trade, and scribes, publishers, and editors included books for children in their inventories (it is significant that virtually every early printer throughout Europe published an Aesop as one of his first volumes). Newbery himself grounded his booklist in the educational theories of John Locke, and the British and American trade in children's books kept up his emphases for decades. In France, the city of Rouen became a center for the children's book trade in the 18th century, and by the late 19th the Paris firm of Pierre-Jules Hetzel set a standard for the making and the marketing of books for younger readers (Hetzel was Jules Verne's and Alexandre Dumas's publisher, and he put out the French translations of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*).⁹ And in America, once public libraries became established, once prizes for children's literature were funded, once children's authors became arbiters of taste and tie-ins, children's literature became a public business.

Children's books are now the most profitable area of publishing, and links between traditional and innovative media establish younger readers as the prime market for imaginative writing. European and American demographics, too, point to a rise in the number of school-age children and a corresponding interest among parents not just for new books to read, but for a sense of history to children's reading. Hardly a day goes by when I do not read of somebody rediscovering a "classic" book or author for a new audience. Such accounts reveal, too, how the categories of the children's book are codified not just by writers and readers, but by book sellers, librarians, and publishing houses. To a large degree, the 20th-century history of children's literature is a story of those institutions: of medals and awards, reflecting social mores and commercial needs; of tie-ins, toys, and replications, in a range of media, of characters from children's books. Such media phenomena attest not only to the governing commodity economy in which the children's book now sits. They also constitute a form of literary reception in their own right. The history of reading perennially links together commerce and interpretation.

The history of reading is also the history of teaching, and children's literature is an academic discipline.¹⁰ Beginning in the 1970s, children's literature became the object of formal study and the subject of professional inquiry. Part of this rise was spurred by the new modes of social history of the time. The emergence of family history as a discipline worked in tandem with the emphasis on first-generation feminist scholarship to seek out texts and authors unmarked by the traditional canon. So, the acts of telling stories, writing books, or entertaining and instructing children came to be appreciated as acts of authorship.¹¹ These developments in social history had a profound impact on the direction of children's literature in academia. The study of children's literature is cultural studies, not just in that it draws on literary, socio-historical, and economic methods of analysis, but in that it may serve as a test case for the syntheses of current cultural criticism. As a result, the discipline of children's literature now flourishes in academia.

* * *

Even the most ordinary prose becomes magical when read aloud at home or at school. And even the simplest-seeming of our children's books teaches something elegant and deep. Perhaps the first book I read to my son was *Goodnight Moon*, and in its catalog of little objects, its repetitive idiom, and its lulling rhythm, I found something that I later learned others had seen within it. Leonard Marcus, writing

in his biography of that book's author, Margaret Wise Brown, suggestively analyzes the book's form and power in ways I had felt palpably.

A little elegy and a small child's evening prayer, *Goodnight Moon* is a supremely comforting evocation of the companionable objects of the daylight world. It is also a ritual preparation for a journey beyond that world, a leave-taking of the known for the unknown world of darkness and dreams. It is spoken in part in the voice of the provider, the good parent or guardian who can summon forth a secure, whole existence simply by naming its particulars. ... And it is partly spoken in the voice of the child, who takes possession of that world by naming its particulars all over again, addressing them directly, one by one, as though each were alive, and bidding each goodnight. ... The sense of an ending descends gradually, like sleep.¹²

And yet, that ending is also a beginning. Marcus calls attention, in his analysis that follows, to relationships between the children's catalog and the structures of fiction generally, alluding in particular to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. What I have come to realize is that our own acts of reading are thus educations in the arts of language: in the ways in which our words construct, reveal, or occlude the world of experience; in the power of words read and spoken to present a room familiar and yet always richly strange.

As the historian Roger Chartier puts it, "Reading is not just an abstract operation of intellect: it is an engagement of the body, an inscription in space, a relation of oneself and others."¹³ If there is a future to children's literature, it must lie in the artifacts of writing and the place of reading in the home and in the school. To understand the history of children's literature is to understand the history of all our forms of literary experience.

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Endnotes

1. Francis Spufford, *The Child That Books Built: A Life in Reading* (London: Faber, 2002), 9.
2. On the rise of what I have elsewhere called biblio-autobiography (that is, the chronicle of life told in terms of books read), see my "Epilogue: Falling Asleep over the History of the Book," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 229–234. Besides Spufford's memoir, another brilliant version of this kind of narrative is Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Knopf, 1999), and also his *A Reading Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).
3. Marx Wartofsky, "The Child's Construction of the World and the World's Construction of the Child: From Historical Epistemology to Historical Psychology," in *The Child and Other Cultural Inventions*, ed. Frank S. Kessel and Alexander W. Sigel (New York: Praeger, 1983), 190.
4. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, trans. Katherine Woods (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1943), 1–3.
5. For the critical traditions centering on reader response theory and the history of literary reception, see Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981); Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, eds., *The Reader In the Text* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); and James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein, eds., *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
6. See Seth Lerer, "Children's Literature and the Stories of the List," *Yale Review* 89, no. 1 (2001): 25–40.

7. Recent studies that still imagine a golden age of children's literature (invariably, Britain from the 1860s to the 1920s) include Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985); and Peter Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). But note, too, the application of this phrase to the postwar period in Peter Hollindale and Zena Sutherland, "Internationalism, Fantasy, and Realism, 1945–1970," in *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History*, ed. Peter Hunt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 256–260.

8. I appropriate this formulation from John Guillory, which he set out in his "Canonical and Non-Canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate," *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 54 (1987): 483–527, and developed in his *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

9. See Michel Manson, "Continuités et ruptures dans l'édition du livre pour la jeunesse à Rouen, de 1700 à 1900," *Revue française d'histoire du livre* 82 (1994): 93–126; Francis Marcoin, "La fiction pour enfants au XIXe siècle," *Revue française d'histoire du livre* 82 (1994): 127–144; and, more generally, Christian Robin, ed., *Un éditeur et son siècle: Pierre-Jules Hetzel (1814–1886)* (Saint-Sébastien, France: Société Crocus, 1988).

10. See Beverly Lyon Clark, *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), especially her bibliographical survey of the teaching, study, and criticism of the discipline, which can be found on pages 239–246.

11. The spur to a good deal of late 20th-century work in family history came from Lawrence Stone, especially his groundbreaking *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), and the many studies written in its wake. Works that have sought to relocate the role of mother and child in the family and in literature include Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998); and Eve Bannet, *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

12. Leonard Marcus, *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 187.

13. Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and the Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 20.

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