

The Importance of Children’s Literature

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Abstract: Children’s literature, the body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people. The article examines important part of children’s literature.

Key words: children literature, five categories of children’s literature, the use for a children’s literature, book weeks, collections.

Introduction

Children’s literature is any literature that is enjoyed by children. More specifically, children’s literature comprises those books written and published for young people who are not yet interested in adult literature or who may not possess the reading skills or developmental understandings necessary for its perusal. In addition to books, children’s literature also includes magazines intended for pre-adult audiences.

The age range for children’s literature is from infancy through the stage of early adolescence, which roughly coincides with the chronological ages of twelve through fourteen. Between that literature most appropriate for children and that most appropriate for adults lies young adult literature. Usually young adult literature is more mature in content and more complex in literary structure than children’s literature.

Main part

Most of the literary genres of adult literature appear in children’s literature as well. Fiction in its various forms—contemporary realism, fantasy and historical fiction, poetry, folk tales, legends, myths, and epics—all have their counterparts in children’s literature. Nonfiction for children includes books about the arts and humanities; the social, physical, biological, and earth sciences; and biography and autobiography. In addition, children’s books may take the form of picture books in which visual and verbal texts form an interconnected whole. Picture books for children include storybooks, alphabet books, counting books, wordless books, and concept books.

The genre encompasses a wide range of works, including acknowledged classics of world literature, picture books and easy-to-read stories written exclusively for children, and fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs, and other primarily orally transmitted materials.

Children’s literature first clearly emerged as a distinct and independent form of literature in the second half of the 18th century, before which it had been at best only in an embryonic stage. During the 20th century, however, its growth has been so luxuriant as to make defensible its claim to be regarded with the respect—though perhaps not the solemnity—that is due any other recognized branch of literature.

“Children”

All potential or actual young literates, from the instant they can with joy leaf through a picture book or listen to a story read aloud, to the age of perhaps 14 or 15, may be called children. Thus “children” includes “young people.” Two considerations blur the definition. Today’s young

teenager is an anomaly: his environment pushes him toward a precocious maturity. Thus, though he may read children's books, he also, and increasingly, reads adult books. Second, the child survives in many adults. As a result, some children's books (e.g., Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, and, at one time, Munro Leaf's *Story of Ferdinand*) are also read widely by adults.

“Literature”

In the term children's literature, the more important word is literature. For the most part, the adjective imaginative is to be felt as preceding it. It comprises that vast, expanding territory recognizably staked out for a junior audience, which does not mean that it is not also intended for seniors. Adults admittedly make up part of its population: children's books are written, selected for publication, sold, bought, reviewed, and often read aloud by grown-ups. Sometimes they seem also to be written with adults in mind, as for example the popular French *Astérix* series of comics parodying history. Nevertheless, by and large there is a sovereign republic of children's literature. To it may be added five colonies or dependencies: first, “appropriated” adult books satisfying two conditions—they must generally be read by children and they must have sharply affected the course of children's literature (Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the collection of folktales by the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, the folk-verse anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* [“The Boy's Magic Horn”], edited by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, and William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*); second, books the audiences of which seem not to have been clearly conceived by their creators (or their creators may have ignored, as irrelevant, such a consideration) but that are now fixed stars in the child's literary firmament (Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Charles Perrault's fairy tales; third, picture books and easy-to-read stories commonly subsumed under the label of literature but qualifying as such only by relaxed standards (though Beatrix Potter and several other writers do nonetheless qualify); fourth, first quality children's versions of adult classics (Walter de la Mare's *Stories from the Bible*, perhaps Howard Pyle's retellings of the Robin Hood ballads and tales; finally, the domain of once oral “folk” material that children have kept alive—folktales and fairy tales; fables, sayings, riddles, charms, tongue twisters; folksongs, lullabies, hymns, carols, and other simple poetry; rhymes of the street, the playground, the nursery; and, supremely, *Mother Goose* and nonsense verse.

Five categories that are often considered children's literature are excluded from this section. The broadest of the excluded categories is that of unblushingly commercial and harmlessly transient writing, including comic books, much of which, though it may please young readers, and often for good reasons, is for the purposes of this article notable only for its sociohistorical, rather than literary, importance. Second, all books of systematic instruction are barred except those sparse examples (e.g., the work of John Amos Comenius) that illuminate the history of the subject. Third, excluded from discussion is much high literature that was not originally intended for children: from the past, Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*, James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* tales, Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Alexandre Dumas' *Three Musketeers*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*; from the modern period, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *Yearling*, J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki*, Enid Bagnold's *National Velvet*. A fourth, rather minor, category comprises books about the young where the content but not the style or point of view is relevant (Sir James Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, F. Anstey's [Thomas Anstey Guthrie] *Vice Versa*). Finally, barred from central, though not all, consideration is the “nonfiction,” or fact, book. Except for a handful of such books, the bright pages of which still rain influence or which possess artistic merit, this literature should be viewed from its socioeducational-commercial aspect.

The case for a children's literature

Many otherwise comprehensive histories of literature slight or omit the child's reading interests. Many observers have made explicit the suspicion that children's literature, like that of detection or suspense, is "inferior." They cannot detect a sufficiently long "tradition"; distinguish an adequate number of master works; or find, to use on thoughtful critic's words, "style, sensibility, vision."

Others, holding a contrary view, assert that a tradition of two centuries is not to be ignored.

Though the case for a children's literature must primarily rest on its major writers (including a half dozen literary geniuses), it is based as well on other supports that bolster its claim to artistic stature.

Children's literature, while a tributary of the literary mainstream, offers its own identifiable, semidetached history. In part it is the issue of certain traceable social movements, of which the "discovery" of the child (see below) is the most salient. It is independent to the degree that, while it must meet many of the standards of adult literature, it has also developed aesthetic criteria of its own by which it may be judged. According to some of its finest practitioners, it is independent, too, as the only existing literary medium enabling certain things to be said that would otherwise remain unsaid or unsayable. The nature of its audience sets it apart; it is often read, especially by children younger than 12, in a manner suggesting trance, distinct from that of adult reading. Universally diffused among literate peoples, it offers a rich array of genres, types, and themes, some resembling grown-up progenitors, many peculiar to itself. Its "style, sensibility, vision" range over a spectrum wide enough to span matter-of-fact realism and tenuous mysticism.

Conclusion

Other measures of its maturity include an extensive body (notably in Germany, Italy, Sweden, Japan, and the United States) of commentary, scholarship, criticism, history, biography, and bibliography, along with the beginnings of an aesthetic theory or philosophy of composition. Finally, one might note its power to engender its own institutions: publishing houses, theatres, libraries, itinerant storytellers, critics, periodicals, instruction in centres of higher learning, lectureships, associations and conferences, "book weeks," collections, exhibitions, and prizes. Indeed, the current institutionalizing of children's literature on an international scale has gone so far, some feel, as to cast a shadow on the spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness that should lie at its heart.

Literature:

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4. Grahame, K. *The Wind in the Willows* Aladdin, 1989.
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