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## The Early History of Children's Literature

Tracing the history of children's literature poses a number of problems, in part because what counts as children's literature is not always clear. Does children's literature comprise what children read, or what is written specifically for children? If the former, then the history of children's literature is largely coextensive or identical with the history of literature more generally, until fairly recently. If the latter — if children's literature is writing that is produced specifically for children — we run into problems as historians and critics with determining the intentions of authors, which are often unclear, as to whether a particular work was only for children, primarily for children, for both children and adults, or not intended for children at all but adopted by them or marketed to them. Does children's literature include educational works, such as primers and textbooks, or by "children's literature" do we mean only fiction, poetry, and drama? Scholars have

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OPPOSITE: THE STORY OF *THE BABES IN THE WOOD* FIRST APPEARED IN SOME FORM BETWEEN 1593 AND 1595. RANDOLPH CALDECOTT ILLUSTRATED THIS 1879 VERSION, SHOWING THE TWO ORPHANS LOST IN THE WOODS.

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different ideas about when the history of children's literature begins and about what counts and what doesn't. In the discussion that follows, we examine different ways of defining children's literature, identify important milestones in its development, and provide tools for understanding its history.

## QUESTIONS OF DEFINITION

### Defining Literature

The problem of defining children's literature begins with the very definition of literature itself. Literature has often come to be understood as being composed of fictional works of "quality" — literary or artistic writing as opposed to popular genres such as comics or romance novels, informative texts such as newspapers or blogs, disposable products such as pamphlets or magazines, practical guides such as how-to manuals or reference books, and nonfictional works such as medical treatises or histories. However, as literary theorist Terry Eagleton explains, this has not always been the case. While "literature" might long have connoted works of privileged status, it was not always limited to fiction:

In eighteenth-century England, the concept of literature was not confined as it sometimes is today to "creative" or "imaginative" writing. It meant the whole body of valued writing in society: philosophy, history, essays and letters as well as poems. What made a text "literary" was not whether it was fictional — the eighteenth century was in grave doubt about whether the new upstart form of the novel was literature at all — but whether it conformed to certain standards of "polite letters." (15)

So, in tracing the history of children's literature, especially before the eighteenth century, we have to consider whether to use our contemporary conception of literature or to include what readers of a given era might have termed literature.

### Defining Children's Literature

Focusing specifically on children's literature, we are faced with yet another problem of definition. Is children's literature defined by what children read or by what is written for children? Does it include practical as well as pleasurable works, or only the latter? Scholars disagree. In his landmark history *Children's Books in England*, first published in 1932, Harvey Darton writes:

## Questions of Definition

By "children's books" I mean printed works produced ostensibly to give children spontaneous pleasure, and not primarily to teach them, nor solely to make them good, nor to keep them *profitably* quiet. I shall therefore exclude from this history, as a general rule, all schoolbooks, all purely moral or didactic treatises, all reflective or adult-minded descriptions of child-life, and almost all alphabets, primers, and spelling-books. (1)

Darton's definition is the narrowest, limited to books specifically produced for children *and* designed to give them pleasure rather than to instruct. Historian Henry Steele Commager offers a different perspective in his introduction to Cornelia Meigs's *A Critical History of Children's Literature* (1953), in which he, too, questions what "children's literature" means:

Is it that literature written especially for the young — the fairy and wonder tales, the nursery rhymes and songs, the dull books of etiquette and admonition and moral persuasion, the stories of school and playing field or of far-flung adventure? It is all of this, to be sure, but it is far more. It is the whole vast body of literature that children have adopted, commonly to share with their elders, but sometimes to monopolize. It is, quite literally, *their* literature. (xi)

Commager supports the broadest possible definition: books that are produced for children *and* books children read. Jeanie Watson concurs in her introduction to Warren W. Wooden's *Children's Literature of the English Renaissance* (1986), in which she summarizes Wooden's perspective: "A literary work becomes a 'children's book' when a child finds pleasure in it. Children themselves claim their own literature" (xix). While Wooden emphasizes the child reader's pleasure, Daniel T. Kline argues in his introduction to *Medieval Literature for Children* (2003) that instructional texts should be included because of the prominent didactic streak that runs through the history of children's literature, from the Middle Ages to the present (3). Whether textbooks or novels, children's literature is often crafted to teach a lesson, and so to exclude didactic works from the history of children's literature is to ignore a significant portion of texts produced for and read by children, Kline concludes.

Peter Hunt complicates these attempts at definition even further, questioning the criteria of "written for" and "read by." He asks:

Just to unpack that definition: what does *written for* mean? Surely the intention of the author is not a reliable guide, not to mention the intention of the



publisher—or even the format of the book? For example, Jill Murphy's highly successful series of picture-books about the domestic affairs of a family of elephants . . . are jokes almost entirely from the point of view of (and largely understandable by) parents. Then again, *read by*: surely sometime, somewhere, all books have been read by one child or another? And some much-vaunted books for children are either not read by them, or much more appreciated by adults (like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*), or probably not children's books at all (like *Wind in the Willows*), or seem to serve adults and children in different—and perhaps opposing—ways (like *Winnie-the-Pooh*). (5)

Hunt further questions the criterion of “read by” because so often the books read by children are thrust upon them by parents or teachers who force children to read them. Jack Zipes poses a challenge to the very notion of “children’s” literature by noting that “there never has been a literature conceived by children for children, a literature that belongs to children, and there never will be. . . . Certainly they participate in children’s literature and the process of making it what it is, but children’s literature *per se* does not exist” (40). According to Zipes, adults create the institution of children’s literature to serve their ideas about children, what children need, or what is best for children, and thus children’s literature belongs really to adults.

It should be clear from these statements that the definition of children’s literature is an unstable and contested one. Ultimately, the definition one chooses at a given moment—and we must allow for the possibility of making different choices at different moments—will be determined largely by one’s purpose. The scholar of “medieval children’s literature,” the university archivist, the elementary-school teacher, the youth-services librarian, the parent, the gift-buying relative, the professor in an introductory college course on children’s literature, and the contemporary child are all likely to approach children’s literature with different goals and investments, and thus they will define children’s literature in different ways, whether or not they are conscious of the assumptions underlying their choices.

### Children’s Literature as Genre

Perry Nodelman argues for understanding children’s literature as a coherent genre, not just as a disparate set of texts grouped artificially by virtue of their intended audience of child readers: “It might, in fact, be a specific genre of fiction whose defining characteristics seem to transcend specifics of time and place, cut

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across other generic categories such as fantasy or realism, and even remain consistent despite variations in the ages of intended audiences" (81). A literary **genre** is a category of literature, such as adventure fiction or mysteries. Readers recognize or determine whether an individual text belongs to a particular genre based on its possession of common or familiar features, tropes, or patterns associated with that genre. Works for children could be textbooks or primers, cautionary tales, domestic novels, or nonsense verse—different literary genres. Nodelman insists that children's literature itself should be thought of as a genre, as possessing a consistent set of qualities, which include the implication of children as readers, the use of a simple style, the focus on action rather than description, the use of apparent simplicity to mask hidden complexities, a matter-of-fact tone despite the strangeness of the events described, focalization through a child's perspective and the use of child protagonists, a doubleness of perspective created by the differences between the perspective of child characters and the voice of a presumably adult third-person narrator, the focus on innocence and knowledge acquisition as central subjects, a pervasive sense of nostalgia and ambivalence, and the importance of home and leaving home (76–81). According to Nodelman, most children's literature shares this list of features.

Why might these features define literature for children and young adults? Nodelman believes these qualities emerge out of the condition of adult authors writing for an audience of readers younger and less knowledgeable or experienced than themselves. He explains, "Children's literature is that literature that constructs child characters in order to satisfy adult wants and needs in regard to children" (172). In this view, the partial list of qualities just noted represents a set of "wants and needs" adults have with regard to children. As long as adults maintain this sense that children need something special, in distinction to what adults need, and as long as they believe adults can provide this for them in ways children cannot for themselves, children's literature will exist as defined by these generic conventions (248).

Not all scholars of children's literature share this thinking about children's literature as a distinct genre with a set of consistent qualities, but Nodelman's hypothesis does suggest a way to read children's literature critically. The concept of genre, or the practice of categorization, is most useful for identifying similarities and the meanings of similarities amid apparent difference, and for identifying differences amid apparent similarities. Recognizing when, how, and why individual texts for children may depart from the conventions or expectations of children's literature provides a useful strategy for critical reading.



## THE "BIRTH" OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE?

### John Newbery

While remaining attentive to these uncertainties, we can sketch a rough outline of the history of children's literature. Alec Ellis adopts the standard narrative about the history of children's literature and states it boldly: "There were no children's books in England before 1600 (although there were numerous schoolbooks and guides to conduct), nor were they recognized as an identifiable branch of English literature until approximately 1700" (3). The person who is most often credited with the "invention" of children's literature is John Newbery, a London bookseller and publisher who lived from 1713 to 1767, and 1744 is often cited as the year children's literature was born. That year John Newbery published *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, a work recognized as igniting the children's book industry for two



OFTEN CITED AS THE "INVENTOR" OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, JOHN NEWBERY PUBLISHED HIS *A LITTLE PRETTY POCKET-BOOK* IN 1744 AND PACKAGED IT WITH A TOY.

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reasons. First, in contrast to most of the children's books that preceded it, it was advertised and designed not only for instruction but also for pleasure. Children were meant to enjoy it, not just to learn from it. Second, Newbery began to think about children and their parents as a distinct consumer group. He designed and marketed *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* to be especially appealing to children through its elaborate and attractive cover and binding and by such features as a letter from Jack the Giant-Killer, a youthful hero of folkloric fame, addressed to the boy or girl reader, and its teaching of the alphabet through descriptions of games. As Peter Hunt observes, it was also "a commercial, mixed-media text" (42), for it was accompanied by an object that could be described as a pincushion for girls or a ball for boys. This rethinking of children as a distinct market, the strategies to incite children's interest—including the increased attention to packaging and pleasure—along with Newbery's established printing and bookselling business poised him to influence the future of the market and garner the credit for having created it.

#### Newbery's Contemporaries: Thomas Boreman and Mary Cooper

Although *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* was indeed innovative, and Newbery himself was influential, this conventional history understates the work of others who came before him. Newbery was actually not the first to publish children's books that attended to the child's pleasure; he has largely overshadowed others who worked in the business during this critical period. Newbery was preceded by Thomas Boreman, another London printer and bookseller, who appears to have begun publishing exclusively for children as early as 1730. *The Gigantick Histories of the Curiosities of London*, a series of small books sized to fit in the child's hand, was Boreman's most successful; it was published in ten volumes between 1740 and 1743. After Newbery's appearance in London in 1743, Boreman disappears from the historical record, probably because of his death (Gillespie 8, 98; Demers 120; Darton 355). Another important innovator was Mary Cooper, who ran her husband's publishing business after his death. A year before Newbery published his first book for children, Cooper's *The Child's New Plaything* was already in its second edition. The book contained an alphabet, traditional medieval tales, and spelling lessons. Cooper's second book, *Tommy Thumb's Song Book*, published in 1744, is considered the first collection of nursery rhymes in English. Though there were others who also contributed to the invention of commercial publishing for children, Newbery, Boreman, and Cooper signal the significant emergence of a more coherent market for children's books and a revolution in thinking about the possibilities of a distinct literature for children.



### Sarah Fielding and the First Children's Novel?

One other milestone in the mid-eighteenth-century birth of children's literature was Sarah Fielding's 1749 publication of *The Governess; or, The Little Female Academy*, the first work that can be described as a novel for children. Sarah was the sister of Henry Fielding, one of the writers who, along with Samuel Richardson, pioneered the English novel in the 1740s. Richardson was Sarah Fielding's friend and her publisher for *The Governess*, a book that involves a group of young schoolgirls who take turns telling their life stories, which are interspersed with fairy tales and the moral advice of their governess, Mrs. Teachum. Though little holds the disparate elements of *The Governess* together and many contemporary readers might find it a strange amalgamation, the notion of a full-length fictional work for children was unheard of, and the novel itself was still evolving when Fielding wrote. Her relationships with key innovators of the novel directly link the history of children's literature with the history of English literature more generally. The publication of *The Governess*, along with the work of Boreman, Newbery, and Cooper, marks the birth of children's literature as we have come to know it.

With the 1740s established as a flashpoint in the history of children's literature, we turn now to the works produced before the mid-eighteenth century and the developments that followed. In doing so, we show why the innovations of the 1740s proved so important and how those who came after built on the work of Cooper, Newbery, and others. Children's literature before the eighteenth century can be divided roughly into two groups:

1. General-audience and crossover texts (those written for everyone, both adults and children, or those written for adults but appropriated by children).
2. Educational books (textbooks, primers, and conduct manuals), including religious texts (catechisms, books of martyrs, children's Bibles, and religious instructions), and didactic poetry and stories (imaginative works whose primary purpose is to teach a specific lesson).

### GENERAL-AUDIENCE AND CROSSOVER WORKS

#### Aesop's Fables

Some of the earliest works read and enjoyed by children were those written for a general audience of children and adults and those written primarily for adults but appropriated by children. These general-audience and crossover texts included fables and chapbooks, and their history as children's literature is really the history

of literature for children to be associated with the press to England of Aesop's Fables. The hare and the book as a way of recommending. During the reduced editions, children, ensure to be children's literature.

#### Chapbooks

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## General-Audience and Crossover Works

of literature more broadly. Such works date to antiquity, as do instructional texts for children. The fables attributed to Aesop from the sixth century BCE came to be associated with child readers, though they were not intended only for children or enjoyed only by children. Eight years after he introduced the printing press to England in 1476, William Caxton published the first English translation of *Aesop's Fables* (1484), which includes the well-known tales of the tortoise and the hare and the boy who cried "wolf." Although Caxton did not conceive of the book as specifically for children, *Aesop's Fables* began to be used in schools as a way of teaching Greek and Latin and useful life lessons, especially after its recommendation by John Locke in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* in 1693. During the nineteenth century, many new translators and illustrators produced editions of *Aesop* for children, ensuring that fables would come to be thought of as children's literature.

### Chapbooks

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, chapbooks became popular. These were small booklets, ranging anywhere from eight to twenty-four pages, made by folding a single large sheet of paper. Cheap and disposable, chapbooks contained ballads; folk tales; illustrated tales of adventure, romance, mystery, and crime; and other such popular forms of textual entertainment. As with fables, chapbooks were produced for the general public with no initial distinction made between child and adult audiences. One popular chapbook tells the story of Tom Thumb, the member of King Arthur's court who, only several inches tall,



RICHARD HEIGHWAY'S DRAWING OF "THE FOX AND THE CROW" FROM *THE FABLES OF AESOP* (1894), BY JOSEPH JACOBS. THOUGH ASSOCIATED WITH CHILD READERS, AESOP'S FABLES WERE NOT INTENDED ONLY FOR CHILDREN.

manages to be heroic and dashing despite his diminutive size. Another chapbook was *The Interesting Story of the Children in the Wood*, or *The Babes in the Wood*, which first appeared in some form between 1593 and 1595. It tells the story of two young children who are left in the care of an uncle when their father dies of illness and their mother dies of grief after their father's death. The children are left an inheritance, which they can claim at the age of twenty-one, but their uncle soon conspires to claim it for himself. He hires two "ruffians" to take them into the woods and murder them, but one takes pity on them, murders his fellow thug instead, and abandons the children in the woods to fend for themselves. However, their fate hardly improves:

Their pretty lips with blackberries  
Were all besmeared and dy'd,  
And when the shades of night arose,  
They sat them down and cry'd.

These pretty babes thus wandered long,  
Without the least relief,  
The woods, the briers, and thorns among,  
Till death did end their grief. (11)

Although *The Babes in the Wood* is about children, it is addressed to adults, as indicated by the opening line: "Now ponder well, ye parents dear." The tale functions in part as a warning to choose the guardian of one's children carefully. At the end of the story, the uncle is racked with guilt, confesses, and dies in prison; and the narrator concludes:

Ye guardians, warning take hereby  
And never prove ingrate.  
To helpless infants still be kind,

And give to each his right;  
For, if you do not, soon you'll find  
God will your deeds requite. (Rusher 12)

Children are frequently endangered in children's literature, and the appeal to children of a story about the murder of helpless babes by a relative would be peculiar if not for the appreciation some children hold for the macabre. We can

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suppose that part of the attraction to such chapbook stories was the fact that most omitted any moral, at least for children. Being designed primarily for adults, they represented an exciting transgression for child readers.

### Folk and Fairy Tales

Although today folk and fairy tales are often imagined as specifically for children, they both originated in the orally transmitted tales of peasant folk and in the parlor games of the social elite. Ruth B. Bottigheimer makes a distinction between folk and fairy tales. Folk tales, passed down and modified through generations, provided a way for ordinary people who may not have been literate to entertain themselves. They featured very ordinary protagonists and often ended unhappily (Bottigheimer 4). These tales made little distinction between child and adult listeners and were not specifically for children. Some fairy tales, which often include magical elements and happier endings, may have had their origins in orally transmitted folk tales, while others were original compositions by writers such as Giovanni Francesco Straparola (1480-1557) and Giambattista Basile (1575-1632), who wrote and published some of the first fairy tales in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy.

Near the end of the seventeenth century, inventing or retelling fairy tales at private gatherings of aristocratic women, called "salons," became a popular parlor game in France. The practice might have been initiated by the Countess d'Aulnoy, who settled in Paris in 1690 and is thought to have coined the term "fairy tales" (Gillespie 44). Several figures capitalized on the fad by transcribing and publishing collections of such tales, including d'Aulnoy herself, who published *Les contes des fées* (*Tales of Fairies*) in 1697, and Charles Perrault, who published *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (*Stories or Tales of Past Times*) that same year (Zipes 20). Perrault's collection was translated into English in 1729 and included such tales as "Cinderella" and "Little Red Riding Hood." Perrault's fairy tales usually had more grisly parts than the versions in circulation today. "Little Red Riding Hood," as written by Perrault, concludes with Red Riding Hood being gobbled up by the wolf. Unlike in later versions, no woodsman comes to slice open the wolf's belly and free her. In "Bluebeard," Bluebeard's wife opens the forbidden chamber and finds the corpses of his former wives, whom he has murdered. Perrault's "Donkeyskin" is a tale much like "Cinderella," except the heroine of this story has a different suitor. The heroine's mother, the queen, commands her husband on her deathbed not to remarry unless he finds a woman more beautiful than she. The king finds the search challenging, but he eventually stumbles upon a solution:

*Into the Woods*



Every day, he studied charming portraits of suitable princesses but not one of them was half as pretty as his dead queen had been. Then he looked at his own daughter and saw she had grown up. Now she was even lovelier than her mother had been when the king first met her and he fell head over heels in love with her and proposed. The princess was filled with horror. (Carter 62)

As Jack Zipes emphasizes, Perrault's tales "were not told or written for children" (23, emphasis in original). Yet over the course of the eighteenth century, fairy tales such as these were retold for children. Like fables, they enjoyed a renaissance in the nineteenth century through the publication of such works as Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm's first collection of German fairy tales in 1812, first translated into English in 1820, and Andrew Lang's *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), which included versions of several of Perrault's tales. While older variants of the tales sometimes employed bawdy folk humor, including sexual innuendoes, scatological references, and gruesome violence, fairy tales were increasingly domesticated and sanitized for the nursery. We discuss folk and fairy tales in more detail in Chapter 4.

#### Adult Works as Children's Classics

The last kind of crossover texts are those like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), which, though written for adults, were read and enjoyed by children as well. Another such crossover hit was Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), but Defoe's work proved particularly resonant, spawning an entire genre called the "Robinsonade." Some of the more prominent Robinsonades include Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), which Wyss wrote to teach his children useful lessons about family and survival, and R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857), an adventurous and optimistic castaway novel for children parodied by William Golding in his much darker *Lord of the Flies* (1954). Works such as these can now frequently be found in both the adult and children's sections of libraries and bookstores in both complete and abridged versions. New Robinsonades continue to be popular among both children and adults. In addition to many books in the genre, at least four recent television programs—*Survivor* (2000–present), *Lost* (2004–2010), and *Crusoe* (2008–2009) for adults and *Flight 29 Down* (2005–2007) for children—have been broadcast in the United States in recent years, and films such as *Cast Away* (2000) have also been popular. Crossover hits such as *Robinson Crusoe* and its imitators raise questions, such as why these narratives would be either popular

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## General-Audience and Crossover Works

with children or thought to be popular with children; why some works cross over to child readers while others don't; and how to classify such works once they have crossed over. Moreover, crossover texts again raise the question of whether children's literature is defined by what is written for children or by what children read.

Almost from the beginning, children's literature and the popularity of crossover works met with resistance. Harvey Darton refers to "the general Puritan discouragement of light reading" (94), which we might take to mean anything not explicitly religious in nature. One of the best-known critics of children's literature along these lines was Sarah Trimmer (1741-1810), a mother of twelve



THOUGH WRITTEN FOR ADULTS, DANIEL DEFOE'S *ROBINSON CRUSOE* (1719) WAS CONSIDERED A CROSS-OVER TEXT, ALSO READ AND ENJOYED BY CHILDREN. ILLUSTRATION BY N. C. WYETH, 1920 EDITION.



who wrote a number of children's books in addition to being a leader of the movement to establish Sunday schools in England. Under her editorship, *The Guardian of Education* (1802-1806) became one of the first periodicals to regularly review children's books and to establish a canon of its best exemplars. In *An Essay on Christian Education*, published posthumously in 1812, Trimmer writes, "Novels certainly, however excellent, should not be read by young persons, till they are in some measure acquainted with real life" (310). Trimmer warns against tales that work "too powerfully upon the feelings of the mind" or give "false pictures of life and manners" (310). The recent opposition to J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series can be understood in terms of this long tradition of skepticism about fiction and fantasy for children. While the condemnation of secular or imaginative literature represents one strand of resistance, another comes from those who, influenced by Locke and Rousseau, thought fantasy and fairy tales would mislead children and deform their sense of reality. According to Darton, this "fear or dislike of fairy tales . . . involves the belief that anything fantastic on the one hand, or anything primitive on the other, is inherently noxious, or at least so void of good as to be actively dangerous" (99). Maria Edgeworth espouses such a view in *Practical Education* (1798), co-written with her father:

With respect to sentimental stories, and books of mere entertainment, we must remark, that they should be sparingly used, especially in the education of girls. This species of reading cultivates what is called the heart prematurely; lowers the tone of the mind, and induces indifference for those common pleasures and occupations which, however trivial in themselves, constitute the far greatest portion of our daily happiness. Stories are the novels of childhood. We know, from common experience, the effects which are produced upon the female mind by immoderate novel-reading. To those who acquire this taste, every object becomes disgusting which is not in an attitude for poetic painting; a species of moral picturesque is sought for in every scene of life, and this is not always compatible with sound sense or with simple reality. (248)

The Edgeworths single out stories of ghosts and other mystical creatures as inflaming children's fears and passions. Although they thought these and other "sentimental" stories were particularly dangerous to girls, they considered tales of adventure especially bad for boys because "the taste for adventure is absolutely incompatible with the sober perseverance necessary to success" (251). The Edgeworths even criticize castaway novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* and its imitations. In effect, pleasurable works were condemned in favor of religious and instructional ones.

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### Textbooks

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## INSTRUCTIONAL WORKS AND DIDACTIC LITERATURE

### Textbooks

So far, we have considered general-audience texts such as fables, chapbooks, and fairy tales, or crossover works such as *Robinson Crusoe*, which were not written for children but either were enjoyed by them or came to be associated with them. Some texts written and published before 1744 were specifically produced for children, but almost all these were religious or instructional texts or didactic works of fiction and poetry. Some of the very oldest texts written for children were designed for instruction. One of the oldest of such works was *Ælfric's Colloquy*, produced about 1000. Ælfric was an Anglo-Saxon abbot who lived from about 955 to about 1020 and came to serve as a teacher at a monastery near Oxford. His *Colloquy*, or written dialogue, is addressed to boys between the ages of seven and thirteen and constitutes a series of questions and answers designed to teach students Latin (Harris 114):

STUDENTS: We children bid you,  
Master, that you teach us to  
speak correctly, for we are  
unlearned and we speak corruptly.

TEACHER: What would you like  
to talk about?

STUDENTS: What do we care what  
we talk about? As long as it's  
correct! Let it be useful, not  
worthless or base.

TEACHER: Will you be flogged  
in order to learn?

STUDENTS: We would rather be  
flogged on behalf of wisdom than  
not to know it. (qtd. in Harris 118)

Another early instructional text produced specifically for a child was Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, which he wrote for his ten-year-old son Lewis around 1391. Chaucer's text describes



HEINRICH HOFFMANN WROTE *STRUWWELPETER* (1848) AS A PARODY OF MORALISTIC CHILDREN'S LITERATURE SUCH AS *THE NEW ENGLAND PRIMER*. CHARACTERS SUCH AS SHOCK-HEADED PETER DEPICTED THE CONSEQUENCES OF FAILING TO OBEY.

how the astrolabe—a device used by astronomers for locating celestial bodies and determining the time—works and the kinds of experiments that can be accomplished with it. The text is noteworthy not only because it is an early example of a work written specifically for a child but also because of Chaucer's status as one of the first writers to make his name writing in vernacular English. Again, the history of children's literature intersects with the history of English literature. Works such as Chaucer's and Ælfric's, along with textbooks and primers such as *The New England Primer* discussed in the previous chapter, alphabet books, and books of conduct and manners constitute the bulk of writing for children until the eighteenth century. Though designed for practical instruction, these texts were sometimes imaginative. Ælfric's *Colloquy* includes role-playing as different kinds of laborers, such as plowmen and shepherds; for example, and *The New England Primer* uses verse to teach the alphabet. These texts can tell us what was expected of children, what children were thought to enjoy or need, and how children lived. They form an important component of the early history of children's literature.

### Religious Works

In addition to secular instructional works, another major portion of writing for children before the eighteenth century was religious in nature. James Janeway's *A Token for Children*, described in the previous chapter, is one example. The Puritans, being particularly concerned with teaching children to read so that they could study the Bible, created a market of literate children that fueled the publication of many spiritual works aimed at the young, including catechisms and other texts of religious instruction or warning. Such texts included Benjamin Keach's *War with the Devil* (1673) and Nathaniel Crouch's descriptively titled *Youth's Divine Pastime, Containing Forty Remarkable Scripture Histories Turned into Common English Verse: With Forty Curious Pictures Proper to Each Story: Very Delightful for the Virtuous Employing [sic] the Vacant Hours of Young Persons, and Preventing Vain and Vicious Divertisements: Together with Several Scripture Hymns upon Divers Occasions* (1691). Though not written for children, John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563) was, according to Warren Wooden, "regularly placed in the hands of Protestant children in England and the colonies by generations of pious parents" (73). It is a long, daunting, and sometimes gruesome catalog of persecuted Christians that pays particular attention to the persecution of Protestants by Catholics. Wooden finds evidence in the text that Foxe did consider the possibility of children as part of his audience (78). Margaret Gillespie argues that "for children, the *Book of Martyrs* was frightening and horrifying" (83), and Cornelia Meigs notes that "as reading for children it is extraordinarily

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unsuitable" (39). These are, of course, modern sensibilities; in contrast, Wooden calls the work "riveting" and "masterful" even for child readers (76-77). John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) offers comparatively lighter fare. A Christian allegory, it follows the trek of a character named Christian from his home to Mt. Zion while carrying the physical burden that represents his sin. Like so many of the other works cited here, this one was not intended specifically for children.

## The Sunday School and Evangelical Movements

Religious children's literature was invigorated by the Sunday School movement, which started in the mid eighteenth century, and was bolstered by the Religious Tract Society, founded in England in 1799 to produce evangelical literature. Two of the most prominent children's periodicals begun in the late nineteenth century, *The Boy's Own Paper* and *The Girl's Own Paper*, were published by this organization. The American Tract Society was founded in New York in 1825 and similarly targeted children for its evangelical mission. Peter Hunt notes the shift in emphasis in religious children's literature around this time from strictly religious or theological instruction to more social education of children, women, and the poor (45). Anna Letitia Barbauld, a Presbyterian and writer who taught at the boys' school her husband operated in Suffolk, England, explained in the preface to her *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781):

The peculiar design of this publication is, to impress devotional figures [feelings] as early as possible on the infant mind; fully convinced as the author is, that they cannot be impressed too soon, and that a child, to feel the full force of the idea of God, ought never to remember the time when he had no such idea—to impress them by connecting religion with a variety of sensible objects; with all that he sees, all he hears, all that affects his young mind with wonder or delight; and thus by deep, strong, and permanent associations, to lay the best foundation for practical devotion in future life. (v-vi)

Other prominent writers of religious children's literature associated with either the Sunday School movement or Evangelicalism include Sarah Trimmer, whose *Fabulous Histories* (1786), sometimes titled *The History of Robins*, uses an anthropomorphic family of robins to teach moral lessons, and Mary Martha Sherwood, whose *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818), subtitled *A Collection of Stories Calculated to Shew [sic] the Importance and Effects of a Religious Education*, was a bestseller in Britain. Because writers such as Barbauld, Trimmer, and Sherwood worked amid the emergence of Romanticism in the late eighteenth and early



nineteenth centuries, their religious children's literature reflects many of the qualities of more secular, didactic, and Romantic writing for children.

### The Rational Moralists

Another group of writers—whom Patricia Demers and Gordon Moyle term “rational moralists”—includes those influenced strongly by philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau. According to Demers, these writers emphasized moral instruction rather than specifically religious instruction, and they advocated the use of rational thought to reach moral conclusions. Demers places Sarah Fielding, Maria Edgeworth, and Thomas Day in this group: “These writers were keen believers in the power of carefully designed narratives and of positive as well as negative examples to shape children's understanding” (Demers 143). Day's *The History of Sandford and Merton* (1783) translates Rousseau's educational philosophies into fiction, depicting the education of the wealthy Tommy Merton and the practical Harry Sandford, the son of a farmer, by a wise tutor. Maria Edgeworth published several collections of stories for children such as *The Parent's Assistant* (1796), which included a story called “The Purple Jar.” In it, seven-year-old Rosamond begs her mother to allow her to buy a beautiful purple jar, so her mother gives her the choice between the new shoes she desperately needs and the frivolous item she wants. Despite her mother's warning, Rosamond selects the jar. When she gets home and empties her new purple vase, she is sorely disappointed: “But she experienced much surprise and disappointment on finding, when it was entirely empty, that it was no longer a purple vase. It was a plain white glass jar, which had appeared to have that beautiful colour merely from the liquor with which it had been filled” (qtd. in Demers 180). For a month Rosamond must wear her old shoes, “till at last she could neither run, dance, jump, or walk in them” (180). Rosamond learns through a combination of experience and reason what would have been the better choice. Though the literature of the rational moralists cannot be reduced to didacticism, instruction did remain its central function.

### Didactic Poetry and Fiction

Works of fiction, poetry, or drama designed to communicate a practical or moral lesson are described as didactic, but not all didactic poetry and fiction can be classified as Evangelical or rational moralist. As Elaine Ostry explains, authors reflected different orientations in different works, or even within the same work: “The author may be known as an Evangelical, but writes a fairy tale, a form disparaged by strict Evangelicals as a lie. Or a fanciful tale has a strong tone

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## Instructional Works and Didactic Literature

of moral didacticism, which is what the fantasists claimed to avoid. In fact, all children's literature conveys some kind of morality, even as it may claim to be non-didactic" (36-37). Bunyan's *A Book for Boys and Girls; or, Country Rhymes for Children* (1686) represents the last type of children's book that dominated before the eighteenth century: imaginative works of fiction or poetry whose primary function was to instruct while also crafted to delight. The emphasis on instruction is evident in this short poem from Bunyan's collection:

The Bee goes out and Honey home doth bring;  
And some who seek that Honey find a sting.  
Now wouldst thou have the Honey and be free  
From stinging; in the first place kill the Bee. (n. pag.)

In case the reader misses the point, the next stanza tells us, "This Bee an Emblem truly is of sin." Isaac Watts, a London minister and writer of church hymns, also wrote didactic poetry for children. His *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1715) was an attempt to provide a more pleasurable source of instruction for children. "What is learnt in verse is longer retained in memory, and sooner recollected," he wrote in the preface to his *Divine Songs* (qtd. in Darton 108). The collection includes such poems as "Praise to God for Learning to Read" and "Against Quarrelling and Fighting." His "Against Idleness and Mischief" is still well known:

How doth the little busy bee  
Improve each shining hour,  
And gather honey all the day  
From every opening flower!

How skillfully she builds her cell!  
How neat she spreads the wax!  
And labors hard to store it well  
With the sweet food she makes.

In works of labour or of skill,  
I would be busy too;  
For Satan finds some mischief still  
For idle hands to do. (38)

Lewis Carroll would later parody this poem in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, demonstrating how some writers resist and even lampoon the impulse to instruct child readers in children's literature. Nevertheless, instructional, religious, and didactic works for children, along with general-audience and crossover texts, prevailed until the revolution initiated by Newbery and others in the mid eighteenth century. While writing for children would remain intensely didactic through the nineteenth century, it was characterized by a trend toward increasingly imaginative and pleasurable works that would sow the seeds of the Golden Age of children's literature in the nineteenth century.

## THE GOLDEN AGE

### The Growth of the Children's Literature Industry

With the advent of a distinct market for children's literature during the mid eighteenth century, a struggle ensued within the enterprise of children's literature between the adult belief that children's books should be educational and the creative and commercial impulse to entertain children and to craft literary works for them. Many societal changes that occurred during the nineteenth century led to a greater emphasis on innovation and imagination: children's culture expanded with the spread of industrialism and the rise of mass production, more children attended school and learned to read, more families attained middle-class status and could afford books for children, children themselves came to be seen as precious objects to spoil, and more writers looked to children as a viable audience. Although traces of didacticism would remain, children's literature would



THE PRINCESS AND THE GOBLIN, ILLUSTRATION  
BY ARTHUR HUGHES.

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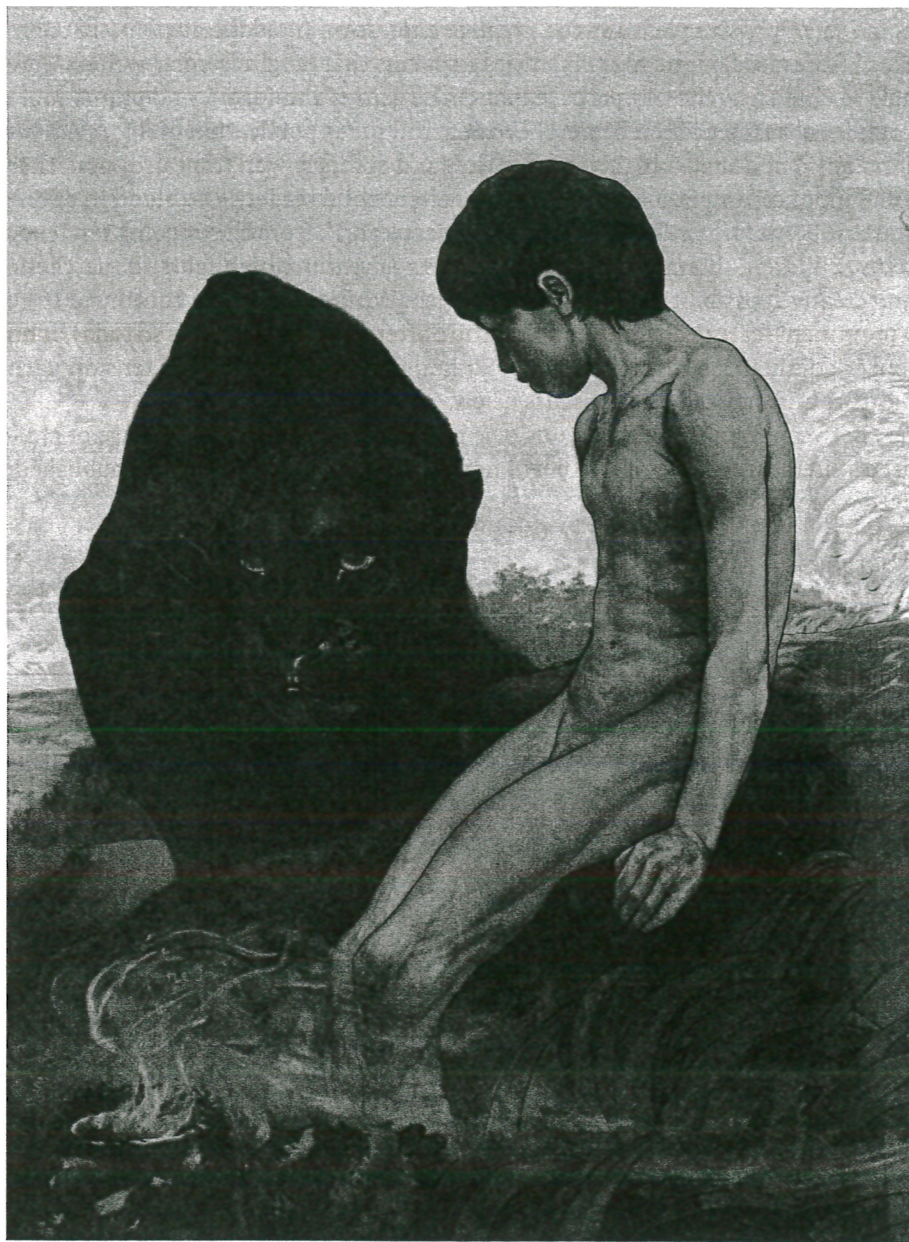
## The Golden Age

come to emphasize pleasure and creative expression in addition to instruction. Freed from the demand to craft stories or poems that taught lessons, writers were able to chart new literary paths, explore new genres and forms, and plumb more complex characters or emotions. Lewis Carroll's 1865 publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a highly imaginative and complex work that uses nonsense and humor to lampoon didacticism and delight child readers, can stand in as one starting point for the Golden Age. A significant break from the ongoing tendency to use children's literature to instruct, *Alice's Adventures* highlights the aesthetic and creative possibilities of writing for youth. While didacticism continued to be a prominent feature of children's literature after *Alice*, and remains so today, it no longer dominates writing for youth. Rather, didacticism occurs in tension with pleasure and artistry, as we discuss below.

Between roughly 1865 and 1915, the period known as the Golden Age of children's literature, some of the best-known classics were written and published. Even a partial list is extensive:

<i>The Water Babies</i> (1863)	Charles Kingsley
<i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i> (1865)	Lewis Carroll
<i>Hans Brinker</i> (1865)	Mary Mapes Dodge
<i>Elsie Dinsmore</i> (1867)	Martha Finley
<i>Little Women</i> (1868)	Louisa May Alcott
<i>Ragged Dick</i> (1868)	Horatio Alger
<i>The Princess and the Goblin</i> (1872)	George MacDonald
<i>What Katy Did</i> (1872)	Susan Coolidge (Sarah Woolsey)
<i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i> (1876)	Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)
<i>Black Beauty</i> (1877)	Anna Sewell
<i>Toby Tyler, or Ten Weeks with a Circus</i> (1881)	James Otis Kaler
<i>Treasure Island</i> (1883)	Robert Louis Stevenson
<i>A Child's Garden of Verses</i> (1885)	Robert Louis Stevenson
<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (1885)	Mark Twain





MOWGLI AND BAGHEERA FROM *THE JUNGLE BOOK*, ILLUSTRATION BY EDWARD JULIUS DETMOLD.

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## The Golden Age

<i>Little Lord Fauntleroy</i> (1885)	Frances Hodgson Burnett
<i>The Jungle Book</i> (1894)	Rudyard Kipling
<i>The Story of the Treasure Seekers</i> (1899)	Edith Nesbit
<i>The Wonderful Wizard of Oz</i> (1900)	L. Frank Baum
<i>Kim</i> (1901)	Rudyard Kipling
<i>The Tale of Peter Rabbit</i> (1901)	Beatrix Potter
<i>Five Children and It</i> (1902)	Edith Nesbit
<i>Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm</i> (1903)	Kate Douglas Wiggin
<i>Peter Pan</i> (1904); <i>Peter and Wendy</i> (1911)	J. M. Barrie
<i>A Little Princess</i> (1905)	Frances Hodgson Burnett
<i>The Railway Children</i> (1906)	Edith Nesbit
<i>Anne of Green Gables</i> (1908)	L. M. Montgomery
<i>The Wind in the Willows</i> (1908)	Kenneth Grahame
<i>A Girl of the Limberlost</i> (1909)	Gene Stratton-Porter
<i>The Secret Garden</i> (1911)	Frances Hodgson Burnett
<i>Pollyanna</i> (1913)	Eleanor Porter
<i>Penrod</i> (1914)	Booth Tarkington

When people refer to "the classics of children's literature," it is most likely the Golden Age that is being invoked.

### The Crossover Appeal of Golden Age Books

Earlier we discussed works written for adults or a general audience that nonetheless possessed crossover appeal for children. In contrast, the classic works of the Golden Age, though ostensibly written for children or youth, held much appeal for adults. According to Jerry Griswold, "Many of the top-selling books in the United States during the [nineteenth] century were children's books. What may be equally obvious is that, since children weren't the only ones who bought and read books, these works must also have been unusually popular among adults"

(viii). Beverly Lyon Clark argues in *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature* (2003) that during the Golden Age, children and adults were increasingly imagined as segregated and distinct audiences. Thus, while *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885) was read and praised by children and adults alike upon its initial publication, by the early decades of the twentieth century, books written for or marketed to children had much smaller followings among adults, testifying to the ways children's literature was coming to be imagined as only for children. There might be some notable exceptions to this trend, such as the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, and the bifurcation of child and adult audiences might have been reversed somewhat by crossover blockbusters such as the Harry Potter series. Nonetheless, as the worlds of children and adults became increasingly segregated, the distinct market of children's books emerged over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the children's book as we have come to know it was born.

### The Tensions That Define Children's Literature

A defining feature of the Golden Age of children's literature is that, on the whole, works published during this period emphasize pleasure and creativity, not just didacticism and education. As we have seen, the history of children's literature, both before and after the Golden Age, can be understood in terms of three sets of competing or overlapping functions:

1. Didacticism, education, and practicality: Some believed that children's literature, even fiction and poetry, should fulfill the practical function of socializing children to behave or to think properly by providing models of good behavior or by teaching children specific lessons.
2. Pleasure, popularity, and profitability: Others were primarily concerned with establishing children's literature as a commercial, money-making enterprise, and thus they were interested in producing works for children that would be pleasurable and popular.
3. Aesthetics, innovation, and literariness: Some understood children's literature as a form of creative and artistic expression and were motivated by the desire to produce aesthetic and innovative literary works for children.

The complex and layered qualities of children's literature are produced by the tensions between these different and sometimes contradictory impulses and functions. As writers and publishers attempt to negotiate between these three

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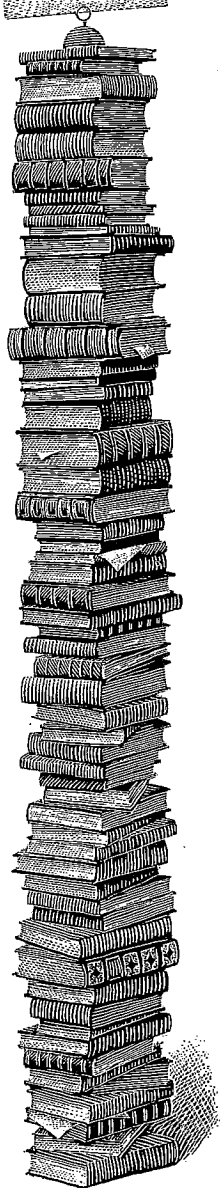


approaches to children's literature, individual works bear the traces of the choices or compromises made among the impulses to instruct, to please, to profit, to innovate, or to create something "serious" or "literary."

For instance, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll stresses the pleasure of the reader and the practice of literary experimentation. *Alice* is full of jokes and whimsical uses of language that work to delight readers, and Carroll experiments with children's literature by insisting on nonsense or pushing the boundaries of traditional children's fare. In these ways, the book emphasizes pleasure and craft over instruction, even if some instruction remains. Kate Greenaway's picturebook *An Apple Pie* (1886) combines prominent images of the alphabet with richly illustrated scenes and short phrases highlighting each letter. Designed to teach children the alphabet, it appears to be primarily didactic, but the illustrations, completed by Greenaway herself, are so noteworthy for their distinctiveness and merit that we cannot ignore the artistry and craft of *An Apple Pie*. Other works, such as Horatio Alger's series books, tend to follow a formula in which a poor boy, often an orphan, manages to advance in the world through a mixture of luck and pluck. These popular works often emphasized the reader's pleasure rather than literary innovation, while instruction remained a secondary motive.

All works for children represent complex negotiations between these different functions. In the chapter on censorship (Ch. 12), we will discuss how many of the controversies surrounding children's literature can be understood in terms of conflicting ideas about which set of functions should be emphasized in writing for children. During the Golden Age, pleasure and aesthetics came to the fore for the first time. By the twentieth century, children's and young adult literature had come into their own, and many "contemporary classics" such as A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926), C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950), E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), and S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) would come to be added to the distinguished list of works written during the earlier Golden Age. Understanding this early history of children's literature and the tensions and controversies that shaped it is crucial to the study of more current works for children.

## Reading Critically



### The History of Children's Literature *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is often taken as a starting point for the Golden Age because it seems to mark a rupture in the history of children's literature by dramatically breaking from the tradition of didacticism in works for children. *Alice's Adventures* has its origins in a story Charles Dodgson told in 1862 to ten-year-old Alice Liddell and her sisters, Edith and Lorina, the daughters of the dean of Christ Church College at Oxford University, where Dodgson taught logic and mathematics. After writing down and revising the original version, Dodgson had the tale published in 1865 under the pen name Lewis Carroll. Conceived during a series of summer afternoons and designed to amuse the Liddell sisters, *Alice's Adventures* focuses primarily on providing pleasurable entertainment while lampooning moralistic or instructional children's books. Thus, like much of children's literature, *Alice's Adventures* negotiates between the impulse to instruct child readers and the impulse to delight them. What makes the work notable is its strong emphasis on the latter. Writing children's literature without succumbing to the temptation to impart lessons required Carroll to draw upon a number of strategies, including the innovative use of nonsense, the linguistic playfulness of jokes and puns, and the explicit mockery of education and didacticism.

Part of what generations of readers have found most delightful about the work is its insistent nonsense, a literary form that plays with and defies conventional uses of language, sense, and logic. Carroll employs nonsense both as a source of amusement and as a technique for short-circuiting the coherence and sense on which instruction rests. The nonsense of *Alice's Adventures* takes a number of forms. One is Carroll's use of puns, such as when the Mouse tells Alice that his history is "a long and sad tale," and Alice replies, "It is a long tail, certainly, . . . but why do you call it sad?" (28). Carroll frequently plays with language like this to humorous effect, as in the Mock Turtle's description of what he has learned in school: "Reeling and Writhing, of course, to begin with . . . and then the different branches of Arithmetic — Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision" (85). The riddle proposed

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by the Hatter — “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?” — is another example of nonsense; it is designed to have no answer (60). Carroll frequently includes nonsense verse throughout *Alice's Adventures*, as when the Mock Turtle sings to Alice:

“Will you walk a little faster?” said a whiting to a snail,  
“There’s a porpoise close behind us, and he’s treading on my tail.” (89)

The notion of a whiting, a type of fish, walking and being tread upon by a porpoise is absurd. Moreover, the very structure of the text, which shifts erratically from scene to scene, also constitutes the nonsense of Wonderland. In the first several chapters, Alice falls down a rabbit hole while playing outside, finds herself indoors somewhere but unable to get out through a tiny door, cries so much she is forced to swim in a large pool of her own tears, meets a number of animals swimming in the pool who appear out of nowhere, makes it to shore, and eventually resumes her chase of the White Rabbit, which takes her outside again, with the overly small door and its challenges having been forgotten. Characters appear and disappear, behave oddly, and speak incoherently. The sheer strangeness of the events, details, dialogue, and characters make it extremely difficult to extract morals or lessons from the work.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a funny book, and its frequent use of humor works to emphasize pleasure over instruction. Some of that humor is grim and even mean-spirited, providing opportunities to delight child readers, for whom grimness and meanness are often taboo. Many of these jokes are at Alice's expense, such as this one, which appears to allude to Alice's death: “‘Well!’ thought Alice to herself. ‘After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down-stairs! How brave they’ll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn’t say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!’ (Which was very likely true.)” (10). (Alice wouldn’t cry or complain after falling off the top of the house because she would be dead.) Later, when Alice finds herself growing and shrinking without any control, she begins to wonder who she is and whether she is still Alice or one of her child acquaintances. She comforts herself by thinking, “I’m sure I can’t be Mabel, for I know all sorts of things, and she, oh, she knows such a very little!” (18). When Alice quotes a poem incorrectly, she thinks, “I must be Mabel after all” (19). Alice is effectively calling her friend Mabel stupid or uneducated, which is itself funny, but doubly so because seven-year-old Alice is so conscious of Mabel’s and her own intellectual capacities. Alice’s running monologue is precocious in its properness and diction, while simultaneously riddled with absurdities and mistakes, further adding to the humor. As Alice finds herself getting taller and taller, she begins to worry about her feet: “‘Oh, my poor little feet, I wonder who will put on your shoes and stockings for you now, dears? I’m sure I shan’t be able! I shall be a great deal too far off to trouble myself about you: you must manage the best way you can — but I must be kind to them,’ thought Alice, ‘or perhaps they





"YOU'RE NOTHING BUT A PACK OF CARDS!" JOHN TENNIEL'S ILLUSTRATION FROM *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND* (1865) BY LEWIS CARROLL DEPICTS THE MOMENT REALITY DESTROYS FANTASY.

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won't walk the way I want to go!" (16). Alice appears to have internalized an adult voice; we can hear an adult encouraging a child to be independent and responsible in Alice's earnest and ridiculous comments to her own feet. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is composed of joke after joke, emphasizing the pleasure of readers who are free to delight in Alice's absurdity and absurd situation.

In addition to nonsense and humor, one last key way in which Carroll's landmark work breaks from the didactic tradition of children's literature is through its outright mockery of education and didacticism. This ridicule can be seen throughout the text. Alice frequently calls upon her education at the most inopportune moments—in addition to being poorly timed, her attempts to seem educated only highlight her ignorance. For instance, as she falls down the rabbit hole at the very outset of her adventures, Alice uses the opportunity to recollect her geography lessons:

"I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?" she said aloud. "I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down, I think—" (for, you see, Alice had learnt several things of this sort in her early lessons in the school-room, and though this was not a very good opportunity for showing off her knowledge, as there was no one to listen to her, still it was good practice to say it over) "—yes, that's about the right distance—but then I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I've got to?" (Alice had not the slightest idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but she thought they were nice grand words to say.) (10–11)

This passage suggests that the knowledge of little girls is most useful for "showing off" rather than for any sort of practical application, and the narratorial aside about saying it over to herself being "good practice" alludes to the common educational technique of having children learn by rote memorization and recitations. Carroll mocks these ideas and practices by having Alice call upon her education while falling perilously down a deep hole, oblivious to the danger of her situation or the futility of her (partial) knowledge. When she finally does land safely and discovers a bottle marked "DRINK ME," Alice again is given the opportunity to draw upon her education. Here, Carroll explicitly refers to the tradition of didactic children's literature represented by works such as Elizabeth Turner's *The Daisy; or Cautionary Stories in Verse* (1807), which illustrates the dangerous consequences for children who engage in such bad behavior as playing with hot poker or climbing up on wells. Alice attempts to use what she has learned from this kind of instruction to help her decide whether to drink what is in the bottle:

It was all very well to say "Drink me," but the wise little Alice was not going to do that in a hurry. "No, I'll look first," she said, "and see whether it's marked 'poison' "

or not"; for she had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild animals, and other unpleasant things, all because they *would* not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them: such as, that a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and that, if you cut your finger very deeply with a knife, it usually bleeds; and she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked "poison," it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later. (13)

The humor here is partly in Alice's understated recollection of the lessons of these stories—a red-hot poker will burn if you hold it *at all*, and drinking poison will more than "disagree with you"—but also in her very limited application of those lessons and her failure to transfer them beyond the specific scenarios of the stories. Thus, Alice has learned that she should not drink from a bottle marked "poison," but she mistakenly concludes that if a bottle is *not* marked "poison," it must be safe to drink. On another occasion, she misremembers Sir Isaac Watts's "Against Idleness and Mischief" (1715), quoted correctly in its entirety on page 67:

How doth the little crocodile  
Improve his shining tail,  
And pour the waters of the Nile  
On every golden scale! (19)

Carroll thus transforms a didactic verse into one of nonsense, and the fact that Alice misremembers it suggests that such works are hardly effective.

The nonsense and humor of *Alice's Adventures* make more sense, ironically, if understood both as part of the larger tradition of children's literature and as Carroll's resistance to that tradition. Of course, the fact that we are able to make partial sense of *Alice's Adventures* by reading the text in terms of the tensions between didacticism and pleasure and the fact that Carroll's allusions might occasion our learning about the original works he lampoons indicate that it is extremely difficult to avoid sense and education completely. *Alice's Adventures* and its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), are puzzles, and solving them requires the reader not only to draw on prior knowledge but also to seek out new information or practice new skills. In these ways, even nonsense can promote instruction. Nonetheless, Carroll's work clearly inclines toward pleasure and away from didacticism, and his use of nonsense, linguistic humor, and literary allusion represents the kind of innovation, creativity, and complexity that ushered in the Golden Age of children's literature.

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## EXPLORE

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Explorations

## EXPLORATIONS

### DISCUSSION AND ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Think about the purpose of your children's literature class and your own purpose for studying children's literature. Given these purposes, discuss your ideas about what counts as children's literature. How does the syllabus for your course explicitly or implicitly define children's literature?
2. How would you define a work such as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1998), which has been read and enjoyed by both children and adults? Are the editions of *Harry Potter* published with "adult" covers adult literature or children's literature? How does *Harry Potter* reflect or fit into the history of children's literature described in this chapter?
3. Writers such as Sarah Trimmer and Maria Edgeworth expressed concerns about the dangers of fiction or fantasy for children. What might be the uses of literature that plays with and distorts reality, as fantasy and science fiction do, as opposed to that which reflects or describes reality? Are the fears of Trimmer and Edgeworth valid? Why, or why not?
4. Identify examples of twentieth-century texts for adults that have crossed over as children's literature as *Robinson Crusoe* did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Why might these works appeal to children? Why might children claim them as their own? Which adult books did you read as a child? How did you stumble upon or select these books?
5. Choose a book such as Stephen Johnson's *Alphabet City* (1995) or *City by Numbers* (1998) and explain how it can be understood in terms of tension between pleasure and instruction. How do these books either function as or problematize didactic children's literature? How do they emphasize pleasure or artistry? Which function of children's literature do they emphasize more?
6. Examine an educational text, such as an alphabet book, primer, or reader like *Dick and Jane*, and analyze what kinds of objects, images, or events it uses to teach children. What do these materials or references reveal about the broader cultural context of the work's composition?
7. Select a crossover text and its abridged version for children, such as *Jane Eyre* (1847) or *Oliver Twist* (1838), and discuss the kinds of choices made in abridging the text and what they tell you regarding assumptions about children, childhood, and children's literature.

8. Examine a work for children that emphasizes pleasure, and describe the strategies it uses to entertain children and avoid didacticism.

#### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Determine the oldest children's book held in your college or university library, read it, and consider how it fits into this history of children's literature.
2. Select an adult text in the public domain that might have crossover appeal, especially one available as a full text online. Abridge it for a young reader, and then reflect on your editorial choices.
3. Choose a text written primarily for children and design a campaign (book cover, print or video advertisements, website, blurbs, etc.) to market the book for adult readers.
4. Select a fairy tale that has been "sanitized" or tamed for children, or an early version of a tale for a more general audience, and rewrite it to appeal either specifically to adults or specifically to children. Reflect on what this suggests about your assumptions regarding what adults or children might enjoy or need.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

**Abbott, Jacob.** *Rollo at Play* (1841). An American minister and educator, Jacob Abbott wanted to teach children good morals and behaviors in ways that would capture their attention and entertain them. His Rollo series, containing more than two dozen volumes, follows the development of a young boy from New England and emphasizes the use of reason in the education and rearing of children. *Rollo at Play* is an episodic novel in which Rollo explores the yard and countryside around his home with the gentle guidance of his family and his family's servant, Jonas.

**Blume, Judy.** *Blubber* (1974). One of the top-selling American children's authors, Judy Blume continues the tradition of using children's literature to combine pleasure with instruction. *Blubber* explores the experiences of teasing and being teased and the potential for children to treat other children with extreme cruelty. This novel allows for a complex study of the dynamics of pleasure, both in terms of the pleasure derived from taunting others and the use of pleasure to entertain readers who are reading about a potentially painful issue such as bullying.

**Burnett, Frances Hodgson.** *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885). A truly trans-Atlantic author, Burnett constructs a character and plot that also span the Atlantic by imagining America and the American child as the heir to Britain and British aristocracy. When his two uncles and father are all killed, Cedric Errol, the son of an American woman living in New York, becomes next in line to the Earl of Dorincourt

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and moves to his grandfather's estate in England, where he converts the unhappy curmudgeon into a loving philanthropist. A sentimental though enormously popular novel, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* prompts an examination of how Burnett offers a model of the ideal child while working to entertain both child and adult readers.

**Fielding, Sarah.** *The Governess* (1749). Like other early works for children, this one combines different genres to both teach and please child readers. Considered the first novel for children, *The Governess* is set at Mrs. Teachum's school for girls and follows the exploits of her young charges as they trade stories about their brief lives, exchange fairy tales, fight and make up, and derive lessons from their stories and experiences. Readers can discern Fielding's efforts to work out what a novel for children should be like.

**Finley, Martha.** *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867). Set on a Southern plantation, Finley's novel about the extraordinarily pious Elsie and her struggles with her less devout and extremely strict father was one of the most popular American children's books of the nineteenth century. The motherless Elsie is mostly cared for by her mammy in the unloving home of her grandfather and step-grandmother. When her father, whom she has never met, returns from his travels abroad, he decides to raise Elsie with an iron fist, coming into conflict with her Christian ideals. This sentimental novel raises interesting questions about the representation of race, childhood agency, the construction of girlhood, and religion in children's literature.

**Hoffmann, Heinrich.** *The English Struwwelpeter* (1848). Written for his own son in part as a parody of moralistic children's literature, Hoffmann's collection of illustrated vignettes includes characters such as Shock-headed Peter, the boy with poor personal hygiene, and Pauline, a girl who plays with matches and burns herself to ashes. A humorous book, *The English Struwwelpeter* will either delight or horrify readers with its illustrations of the worst that can happen when children fail to obey adults by not eating all their dinner or by making fun of other children.

**Milne, A. A.** *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926). Milne's twentieth-century classic about Christopher Robin's hapless stuffed bear who comes to life and has adventures has delighted readers with its clever wordplay and satirical character sketches. A combination of fantasy and nonsense, *Winnie-the-Pooh* addresses both children and adults and can be read in the tradition of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. This first book of Milne's Pooh stories follows the adventures of Pooh, Piglet, Kanga, Eeyore, and Owl as they explore the Hundred Acre Wood.

**Newbery, John.** *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744). The work often credited with igniting the children's literature industry, *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* is designed both to delight and to instruct. An eclectic amalgamation, it contains games, alphabets, illustrations, rules for behavior, proverbs, and poems for children. The recent



reissue of an early American edition allows contemporary students to read and study Newbery's landmark text.

Twain, Mark (Samuel Langhorne Clemens). *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). An American classic about a mischievous but clever boy, *Tom Sawyer* was popular with both children and adults and, like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, further challenges the centrality of didacticism in children's literature. Recounting the adventures of Tom and his friends, including the discovery of treasure and their harassment of a local criminal, Twain's novel provides an opportunity to examine the construction of boyhood; in addition, since Tom's adventures are inspired by the books he has read, *Tom Sawyer* both records and contributes to the history of children's literature.

White, E. B. *Charlotte's Web* (1952). White's *Charlotte's Web* follows the efforts of an anthropomorphic spider and other farm animals as they attempt to give meaning to the life of a young pig named Wilbur and thus save him from being slaughtered. After spinning a series of webs that declare Wilbur to be "Some Pig" and "Terrific," Charlotte lays a sac of eggs and dies, prompting a discussion of how children's literature addresses such issues as the meaning of life and sacrifice and death.

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## APPROACHES TO TEACHING *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*

[Elementary School]

### Preparation for the Lesson

Read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a class, skipping some chapters or episodes as desired.

### Learning Goals

- To practice using evidence from a text to support an argument (in the "Dream or Nightmare?" activity)
- To learn about didactic and moralizing children's literature before *Alice*
- To examine jokes and puns in *Alice*

### Activity One: Dream or Nightmare?

Ask each student: Is Alice's journey a dream or a nightmare? Why do you answer as you do? Ask the students to provide evidence from the text to support their opinions. If the students have difficulty coming up with evidence, suggest some of the following:

*Dream:* Alice gets to go somewhere exciting; she meets many interesting characters; the world she enters is called "Wonderland," which is a positive description; Alice has the fun of growing and shrinking; Alice is free of all the control and strictness of her regular life (including forgetting her boring lessons); the nonsense she encounters is quite enjoyable.

*Nightmare:* A number of the characters she meets are distant or hostile; it is frightening to grow and shrink; her life is threatened at various times; she cannot remember who she is some of the time; she doesn't remember what she has been taught; the world she encounters doesn't make sense and she doesn't know the rules; she has to go on trial.

If time permits, students can draw, paint, or use collage to depict their vision of *Alice* as either a dream or a nightmare (or both a dream and a nightmare). Each student should exchange his or her drawing, painting, or collage with another student and write a short paragraph comparing their depictions of *Alice*.

### Activity Two: *Alice's* Didactic Influences and Foils

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* parodies children's literature of the past, which was often designed to teach lessons and frequently lacked humor. In this activity, an old-fashioned didactic poem will be presented in combination with the section of *Alice* that makes fun of it. On the blackboard or projector, copy the passage from *Alice* beginning with "It was all very well to say 'Drink me,' but the wise little Alice was not going to do *that* in a hurry" (quoted on pp. 77-78). Hand out the following poem, explaining that it was a typical moralistic poem from the early nineteenth century:

"Dangerous Sport," by Elizabeth Turner

Poor Peter was burnt by the poker one day,  
When he made it look pretty and red!  
For the beautiful sparks made him think it fine play,  
To lift it as high as his head.

But, somehow it happen'd, his finger and thumb  
Were terribly scorch'd by the heat;  
And he scream'd out aloud for his mother to come,  
And stamp'd on the floor with his feet!

Now if Peter had minded his mother's command,  
His fingers would not have been sore;  
And he promised again, as she bound up his hand,  
To play with hot poker no more. (69-70)

[For more in this vein, "Susan and Patty" is another Elizabeth Turner poem that influenced *Alice*. It can be found in *The Cowslip; or, More Cautionary Stories in Verse* (1811), available via Google Books.]

Explain that Lewis Carroll was attempting to make fun of poems such as "Dangerous Sport" in *Alice* and to replace them with literature that children would find more enjoyable. Talk about the cautionary tale, a genre in which children are warned about threats and dangers, especially the dangers caused by bad behavior. Ask the students which they enjoy more—Turner's poem or Carroll's book—and discuss the reasons for their answers.

An optional extension of this exercise is to have the students write a cautionary poem of their own. To begin, lead a class discussion about the dangers that

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children are warned against in the modern age. These might include talking to or emailing strangers, riding in a car without a seatbelt, or biking without a helmet. Ask the students to write a short poem about one of these dangers (it doesn't have to rhyme). When the students have drafted their poems, lead a discussion about what has changed between "Poor Peter's" childhood and their own. What dangers do modern children face that nineteenth-century children didn't, or vice versa? Ask the students if they have ever read a poem about the threats that modern children face, and if modern children would enjoy such cautionary poems.

### Activity Three: Puns and Jokes

Define puns as "deliberate confusions of similar words or phrases for comic effect," and explain that Lewis Carroll was extremely interested in wordplay, including jokes and puns. Prepare a handout with the following puns from the chapter "The Mock-Turtle's Story":

A. "When we were little . . . we went to school in the sea. The master was an old Turtle—we used to call him Tortoise—"

"Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn't one?" Alice asked.

"We called him Tortoise because he taught us," said the Mock Turtle angrily.

B. [The Mock Turtle describes the course he took]: "Reeling and Writhing, of course, to begin with . . . and the different branches of Arithmetic—Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision."

C. "And how many hours a day did you do lessons?" asked Alice, in a hurry to change the subject.

"Ten hours the first day," said the Mock Turtle: "nine the next, and so on."

"What a curious plan!" exclaimed Alice.

"That's the reason they're called lessons," the Gryphon remarked: "because they lessen from day to day."

Discuss how these three puns work, and what words are being played with. As a continuation of the lesson the next day, ask the students to bring in three or four puns they like, and have them present these to the class.