



**“THE KIDDIE’S MILIEU”:
THE FASCINATING WORLD OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE**

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ABSTRACT

Children’s literature is one of the most diverse and dynamic areas of publishing. The best children’s books offer readers enjoyment as well as memorable characters and situations and valuable insights into the human condition. In the world of children’s books, there are certain factors which are common to all literatures. Around the world, conditions in which children’s books flourish or otherwise range widely. In developing countries there may be a conflict between the language of general use and the indigenous community languages or mother tongues. It is generally recognised that children acquire literacy skills most readily if they first become fluent readers in the language spoken in the home. All children need to be able to choose from a wide range of titles, and children’s books must compete on a level playing-field. To support the production and reading of children’s books there must be good systems of distribution. Exposing children to quality literature can contribute to the creation of responsible, successful, and caring individuals.

Outside academia, the term ‘children’s literature has a largely unproblematic, everyday meaning. From newspapers and other media to schools and in government documents, it is understood to refer to the materials written to be read by children and young people, published by children’s publishers, and stocked and shelved in the children’s or young adult sections of libraries and bookshops. Currently, everything from folk and fairy tales, myths and legends, ballads and nursery rhymes-many of which date back to preliterate epochs- to such embodiments of our transliterate age as e-books, fan fiction, and computer games may come under the umbrella of children’s literature. Additionally, as an area of research and teaching, children’s literature encompasses all genres, formats and media; all periods, movements and kinds of writing from any part of the world, and often related ephemera and merchandise too. It addresses works that were specifically directed at the young readers, and those that were once read by children but are now almost exclusively read by scholars.



In the world of children's books, there are certain factors which are common to all literatures. The need for stories is universal, and there can be few children, even in the most deprived circumstances, who do not have the opportunity from a very early age, to listen to people telling them stories. In some countries and in many ethnic groups, the custom of oral storytelling continues into adulthood and, even in the most developed countries, as late as the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was possible for many people to learn all they needed to know by listening to others. Worldwide, at the end of the twentieth century, there is a belief that literacy is essential. Even in those societies where information technology is advanced, good reading skills are essential to exploit it, and it is generally thought that the best way to acquire fluency is through reading practice; children books are thus a practical necessity.

The development of children's literature is linked to social, educational and above all economic factors. Around the world, conditions in which children's books flourish or otherwise range widely. In some western countries children's book production is so high in terms of the number of titles published each year that it suffers from success; books are taken for granted, and concerns about quality and standards are expressed by a relatively small group of teachers, librarians, parents and critics, often dissipating their efforts through a large number of different organisations. At the end of the scale there are poor countries ravaged by war and famine where strivings for a printed children's literature must seem to be very low on the national agenda. In between there are countries where there is official involvement, where there are one or two supportive central organisations and where there is a steady rise both in the number of children's books published annually and in their quality.

Every country has its own collection of traditional stories. Myths developed as a way of explaining natural phenomena such as the creation of the earth, the changing seasons, day and night, and floods and drought. Hero legends grew up around charismatic characters, who frequently acquired supernatural powers as time passed. Fables were a way of fleshing out useful advice and everyday truths. Folk-and fairy tales provided psychological satisfaction through their simplified system of reward and punishment, or as a way of working out relationships and fears in safety. These traditional tales reflect such basic truths that the same stories crop up all over the world, the details adapted to local circumstances. Such stories transplant easily and at the end of the twentieth century, many children are acquainted with the traditional stories of countries and ethnic groups other than their own. The popularity of this kind of story led, as children's literature developed in the nineteenth century, to the writing of modern fantasy stories. Traditional stories, although they began as, and in many places still are, entertainment for the whole community, have in recent times come to be regarded as being something for children alone. In countries where literacy is at an early stage of development or where other imaginative literature may be suspect, traditional tales in



printed form are an easy way of providing already familiar and uncontroversial stories for reading.

Although most European countries can claim one or two isolated examples of books published specifically for children in the sixteenth century, children's literature began to flourish generally in the nineteenth century at a time when population was growing rapidly, when educational opportunities were increasing and when technological developments made both paper and the printing process available at a reasonable price. This was also the period when land elsewhere, including many of today's less developed and poorer countries, was being settled and exploited by European nations and into which European teachers and missionaries were importing books from their country of origin. The results of these influences can still be seen at the end of the twentieth century. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Europeans were divided almost as much by class as by nationality. Despite constant wars and the resulting changes in national boundaries, royalty, the aristocracy and the growing middle classes moved around comparatively easily, familiar with the major languages and receptive to new ideas. In this environment, children's books translated and transferred from country to country with amazing ease.

In the twentieth century, children's literature in Europe has been more seriously affected by politics and by war. The First World War probably affected it little, but the period of dictatorships in Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal certainly had significant influence on the content of the children's books in those countries, as did the 1917 Revolution in the USSR. The Second World War had repercussions at the time on the production of children's books because of paper shortages, the absence on war service of publishing personnel, and the bombing of publishing houses and warehouses. It served as a watershed in children's literature; many children's books which had been steadily reprinting for years finally disappeared at this time. Later, the war influenced the content of children's books, particularly from the 1960's onwards when writers who had themselves been children during the war began to produce stories based on their childhood experiences. Authors wrote from different viewpoints; some had been refugees, some had been evacuated to safe areas, some had lived under occupation and some had experienced at close quarters the treatment of the Jewish population. Anne Frank's Diary, published in The Netherlands in 1947, with its account of day-to-day life hiding from the Nazis during the occupation, has captured the imagination of young people worldwide.

In many European countries minority languages were actively suppressed until comparatively recently but, partly because of the existence of traditional stories, have been kept alive and are now being encouraged and supported. The market of children's books in some of the lesser-used languages is very limited and precludes the printing of any title in large quantities, and hence at low prices.



Children's books are particularly subject to economic pressures. The costs of originating full-colour illustrations are high and need to be spread over as many copies as possible. Even those countries with high book sales find it advantageous to produce co-editions, where publishers in a number of countries agree to publish a book simultaneously. The addition of the text in the appropriate language constitutes a very small part of the total production costs. The USA, Britain, Germany, Japan and the Scandinavian countries are predominant in this market but the practice of co-editions is appropriate everywhere and can be particularly beneficial for countries which share the same social and cultural patterns. One such scheme operates in Southeast Asia under the auspices of the Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU). Perhaps the ultimate in international children's literature production is represented by *All in a Day* (1986), devised by Mitsumasa Anno, the Japanese author-illustrator. Published in International Peace Year, the book shows how, although we live on the same planet, climate, customs and language differ from one country to another. With eight double-page spreads, each of which takes the reader through a complete day in the life of a different child and its family, the book is about the concept of time.

The other kind of children's book in which coloured illustrations are essential is the non-fiction or information book. Until comparatively recently such books have been significantly outnumbered by fiction but lavishly illustrated non-fiction is a recent specialisation in international publishing, although the subject must, of course, be of equal interest and relevance to all the participating countries. This kind of publishing is known as 'packaging'. A packager buys in the services of illustrators and writers and is responsible for producing a master copy which is then sold to publishers in as many countries as possible. The illustrations are identical in all editions, and as in the case of picture story books the text may be translated or adapted as appropriate. Such economies in production can only be achieved in those books which contain a significant number of full-coloured illustrations.

Even in comparatively rich countries, there are problems in providing children's books in minority languages. In developing countries there may be a conflict between the language of general use and the indigenous community languages or mother tongues. It is generally recognised that children acquire literacy skills most readily if they first become fluent readers in the language spoken in the home. All children need to be able to choose from a wide range of titles, and children's books must compete on a level playing-field. Poorly produced books on shoddy paper, with little or no colour, unsophisticated illustrations and turgid, if well-meaning, texts are unlikely to be favoured in preference to glossily produced, well-illustrated and well-written books. Text in the appropriate language does not compensate for an unattractive appearance: Children are not motivated to support worthiness. It is only in the last twenty years or so that Welsh-language children's books have been able to compete fairly, in terms of both quantity and quality, with English-language books. Belief in the value



of, and need for, children's books has led to the setting up of children's book publishing programmes in the most remote and undeveloped parts of the world. These include workshops for potential authors and illustrators, and subsidies for publishers and support for distribution methods which get books to children. This happens even in countries where the casual observer might suppose that there are more important basic needs such as food, water, health and peace to be met first.

Because of the book activities of various international organisations, certain trends in children's books are to be found worldwide. From 1960's onwards, there has been general concern about racism, sexism and even ageism in children's books. There has been a wish to cater for children with special needs, whether these are due to outstanding gifts, learning difficulties or physical handicap. Ideas have been shared about provision for children of ethnic minorities or whose first language is a minority language in the country where the child lives. There has been international interest in the production of dual- language picture-books, where the text appears in the main language of the country alongside a minority language. Books produced specifically to meet the needs must be well supported by parents, teachers and librarians if their publication is to be commercially viable.

To support the production and reading of children's books there must be good systems of distribution. Few children, whatever their social and economic circumstances, have access to well-stocked bookshop or can afford to buy all the books they want; good libraries and programmes to get books into children's hands are essential. For this reason, the publications of organisations such as the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) also throw interesting light on children's literature and its availability and standing in individual countries.

Giving children access to all varieties of literature is extremely important for their success. Educators, parents, and community members should help students develop a love and passion for reading. Not only is reading literature important in developing cognitive skills to be able to succeed in a school or work setting, but it is valuable for other reasons as well. Children's literature is important because it provides students with opportunities to respond to literature; it gives students appreciation about their own cultural heritage as well as those of others; it helps students develop emotional intelligence and creativity; it nurtures growth and development of the student's personality and social skills; and it transmits important literature and themes from one generation to the next.

The first value to note is that children's literature provides students with the opportunity to respond to literature and develop their own opinions about the topic. This strengthens the cognitive developmental domain as it encourages deeper thought about literature. Quality literature does not tell the reader everything he/she needs to know; it allows for some



difference in opinion. One reader may take something completely different away from the piece of literature than the next reader, based on the two personal viewpoints and experiences. Students can learn to evaluate and analyze literature, as well as summarize and hypothesize about the topic.

Second, children's literature provides an avenue for students to learn about their own cultural heritage and the cultures of other people. It is crucial for children to learn these values because, developing positive attitudes toward our own culture and the cultures of others is necessary for both social and personal development. In saying this, however, when teaching students about the cultural heritage of others, one should be very careful in selecting which books to recommend to young readers. There are many stories, some folktales, which contain blatant stereotypes and inaccuracies about certain cultural groups. However, there are some children's books that are more accurate in teaching the cultural differences of others.. Many books are available that depict culture as an important piece of society that is to be treasured and valued, and those books can have great value for students.

Third, children's literature helps students develop emotional intelligence. Stories have the power to promote emotional and moral development. Children's literature contains numerous moments of crisis, when characters make moral decisions and contemplate the reasons for their decisions, an important skill for children to see modeled. Children's literature encourages students to think deeper about their own feelings.

Children's literature also encourages creativity. Children's literature promotes the development of students' internal imaginations.

Children's literature is of value because it fosters personality and social development. Children are very impressionable during the formative years, and children's literature can help them develop into caring, intelligent, and friendly people. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget says that when students move from the pre-operational to the operational stage of cognitive development, they become less egocentric. Whereas students in preschool and kindergarten may be entirely focused on themselves, as students grow older they begin to take into account the feelings and viewpoints of others. Literature encourages students to be considerate and friendly people, and these traits may be consistent with developing students into quality citizens.

Finally, children's literature is of value because it is a timeless tradition, one in which books are the major means of transmitting our literary heritage from one generation to the next. Children are only young for a short time, and so we must give them access to a basic literary heritage of timeless books. Quality children's literature has the great power to captivate audiences for many generations. Children's literature is extremely valuable in both the school



setting and at home. Teachers and parents should both be able to differentiate between quality and mediocre literature, in order to give students access to the best books to encourage these important values of literature and considering developmental domains. Children's literature is valuable in providing an opportunity to respond to literature, as well as cultural knowledge, emotional intelligence and creativity, social and personality development, and literature history to students across generations. Exposing children to quality literature can contribute to the creation of responsible, successful, and caring individuals.

These days it's not easy getting kids to read. With all their hand-held game consoles, tablets and other gadgetry, old fashioned books just don't seem to have the appeal they once used to. A 1984 study by the Department of Education found that eight percent of 13-year-olds "never or hardly ever" read for fun. In 2008 that figure rose to twenty-four percent. And according to a report from the Kaiser Family Foundation, youngsters spent an average of seven and a half hours a day on entertainment, while only twenty-five minutes were dedicated to reading a book. So, what does the future hold for children's literature? Is it all doom and gloom?

The introduction of new reading devices, including the Apple iPad, Amazon Kindle, Kobo Reader, and multi touch smart phones, is radically changing the way we consume text. The landscape of children's reading and early literacy development in particular is changing dramatically as many children share access to these new devices at home, school, and the library. The emergence of the "book app" and enhanced e-books for children marks an important milestone in the way young children engage with stories. Enhanced e-books are electronic books that incorporate additional features to complement traditional picture book elements, namely text and images, with audio, video, animation, and interactive games. These new components promise to engage children in new and exciting ways, but, when inappropriately used, they can also distract young minds and detract them from narrative comprehension. Children are engaging with e-reading technologies at an early age, yet we still know very little about the effects of e-reading and whether it supports or constrains the development of early literacy. Furthermore, research studies that support our understanding of how e-books fit into the ecology of children's literacy practices are few.



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