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## Children's literature in three tenses: Past, present, and future

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It's common at the year's end to grow reflective, to review the past and perhaps hazard a guess or two about what will happen in the future. At the end of a century that is also the beginning of a new millennium, the urge to take stock of where we've been, where we are, and where we're likely to go in the future seems irresistible. My daunting assignment for this particular historical reflection is children's literature. How do I compress into a single article material that could stretch to a volume of many articles? Of necessity, this review is highly selective as to time frame, genres, examples, and issues.

We begin not with the beginnings of a children's literature, which literary historians place in the 1740's when John Newbery, the bookseller, began to market books intended exclusively for children, but with the children's books of the nineteen forties and fifties. By this time, children's stories had lost much of their former didacticism and overt moralizing. Works of fiction showed, for the most part, resourceful, adventuresome children engaged in everyday experiences, respectful of the adults who remained on the periphery of their lives, ready to step forward if their help was needed.

New books were relatively few by today's standards of burgeoning publishers' lists, but among them were to be found classics in the making. Publications of this period include the inimitable *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) in which fantasy and realism are innovatively

combined, to the chagrin of critics who believed that books should be limited to one or the other. Winner of the American Library Association's prestigious Newbery Award, Robert Lawson did compose "pure" fantasies featuring talking animals; probably his best-known is *Rabbit Hill* (1945), whose animal characters, among them Father and Mother Rabbit, and their athletic high jumping son, Little Georgie, are vividly drawn for young eyes.

In 1949, Marguerite Henry received the Newbery Award for *King of the Wind*, one of her several distinguished stories about horses. *King of the Wind* traces the ancestry of the great Kentucky Derby winner, Man o' War, whose pedigree is linked to the noble line of the Godolphin Arabian. A polished gem that continues to dazzle readers is Elizabeth Enright's *The Hundred Dresses* (1944). In this brief, memorable book, a few well-chosen words teach without preaching how expressions of unkind intolerance hurt giver and receiver alike.

### FROM PAST TO PRESENT

#### Stories: Realistic fiction and fantasy

Elizabeth Enright was as well a prolific writer of the family stories that abounded in those days. While she made the Moffat family immortal, Beverly Cleary spun tales about *Henry Huggins* (1950), Ramona, Beezus, and their friends who live forever on Klickitat Street in a Portland, Oregon neighborhood. "Beverly

Cleary's Oregon stories—from *Henry Huggins*, published in 1950, to *Ramona Forever*, published in 1984—provide a kind of chronicle of changes in middle-class American life over the past forty years” (Chatton, 1995, p. 299). True enough. But, in the beginning at least, the chronicle depicts unlikely lives relatively free of personal and social problems. And it reflects what was reality in America: a segregated society.

These and other family stories of the era typically were set in an all-white small town or suburb. Middle-class families were presented traditionally intact, with two parents playing traditional roles: Father went off each day to work, while Mother might be found in the kitchen peeling apples, mending, or making dinner. These were essentially unrealistic ‘realistic’ stories where, unlike real life, everything worked out harmoniously in what was presented as the best of all possible worlds. ‘Telling it like it is’ was yet a foreign concept in the realm of children’s stories.

An exception to the sameness of children’s fiction of the time was the sub-genre of realistic fiction created single-handedly by Lois Lenski, a series of stories featuring regional groups from throughout the United States. These are compassionate, albeit moralistic, stories of struggling, often disadvantaged families who, through courage, hard work, and close family relationships, are seen as able to survive their hardships. In 1945 one of these books, *Strawberry Girl*, received the Newbery Award; it tells of a poor but industrious family raising crops in rural Florida. Another, *Judy’s Journey* (1947) is an account of the trials and setbacks endured by migratory workers. Lenski’s regional fiction about people who were ‘different’ stood out among stories in which the white middle-class were featured and life for the most part was viewed through rose-tinted glasses.

Joseph Krumboltz’s Newbery-winner, ... *and Now Miguel* (1954), did depart from the norm of the day to feature a family of Hispanic American shepherds in New Mexico. However, as critic David Russell (1997, p. 36) points out, stereotypes of this group as uneducated outsiders were perpetuated even in this sensitive, well-crafted novel. For the most part, blacks and other minority groups rarely made appearances in children’s books; when they did,

they were written by “well-intentioned white writers and, unconsciously, still white-oriented” (Townsend, 1966, p. 259).

Two examples are Jesse Jackson’s *Call Me Charley* (1945), in which a black boy struggles for acceptance in a white community and *Mary Jane* (Sterling, 1959), whose heroine faces hostility and isolation as a black in an all-white school. Both characters are seen as stoic and long-suffering, grateful for crumbs of kindness tossed to them by whites. “Just as the poor [Victorians] were expected to rely on and be grateful for the beneficence of the rich, so the black must rely on and be grateful for the beneficence of the white” (Townsend, 1966, p. 258).

It was time for change: time for African Americans and writers and artists representing other minorities to be heard; time for questioning aloud values and beliefs formerly taken for granted; time for anyone and everyone to speak up and speak out. Although we’re fond of inventing labels for them, decades are often merely periods of ten years, with few characteristics to distinguish one from another. Not so the nineteen sixties. If the defining word for the twenties is ‘roaring,’ that for the sixties is ‘changing.’ Nothing in the society, children’s reading material included, was the same after the sixties.

1963 was the publication date of *It’s Like This, Cat* (Neville). What now seems an innocuous book seemed in those days daring, even revolutionary. As in its landmark predecessor, *Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951), the youthful protagonist not only spoke for himself, he also had the temerity to criticize his parents and other authority figures. In the junior high school where I taught, the librarian, shocked, refused at first to shelve the book. With Emily Neville’s book leading the new wave, there followed a flood of books in the sixties and into the seventies that featured young voices raised in protest against injustice, unfairness, and less-than-adequate parents. Social and moral issues so recently taboo in children’s literature became its preferred subject matter.

Feisty *Harriet the Spy* (Fitzhugh, 1964) was the lonely victim of her neglectful, affluent parents. In *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* (Kerr, 1972), Dinky Hocker’s mother is so busy ministering to strangers that she ignores her daughter’s needs. A boy experiences a homo-

sexual encounter (Donovan, 1969). On the harsh city streets, the poor prey on each other in Paula Fox's *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1967). A sadistic monster of a man terrorizes the young orphan who trusted him in *Dorp Dead* (Cunningham, 1965). John and Lorraine, who are alienated from their parents, recall by turns how they betrayed their friend, the Pigman—a sad, lonely, strange old man—and contribute to the condition that leads to his death (Zindel, 1968). A young boy anguishes over his family's decision: they have decided to return to the agency a toddler whom they adopted, belatedly foreseeing problems because he is black and they are white (Neufeld, 1968).

Divorce, drug abuse, unmarried mothers, premarital sex, suicide, abandonment, mental illness, retardation, physical handicaps, racism, bigotry, child abuse, even incest—all these subjects came into children's literature to stay. In the nineteen sixties, the publishing establishment suddenly awoke. Writers and editors saw at last that far from being banished from children's books, these issues belonged in them. Within the pages of a book, children had a safe place to confront the negatives of life: "Through the new realism the reader has the security of being involved without suffering the consequences of involvement. Young readers can test their beliefs and values against those revealed by the author. Within the exclusive privacy of a book, and without the ever-pressing impingement of peer and class values readers can rethink, reassess and, more importantly, refeel their own attitudes about themselves, about others, and about the world in which they live" (Root, 1977).

The 'problem' or 'issues' book has endured, flourished, and changed with the passing years to accommodate societal issues as they arose. The issue of representation for all in a pluralistic society, however, is only partially addressed. We have begun at last to hear the authentic voices of African Americans and, to a lesser extent, the voices of other parallel culture previously not heard in the United States. In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1977), Mildred Taylor shows proud African Americans in Mississippi coping with racism without cringing. The humiliations inherent in the history of Japanese Americans are revealed in the several books of Yoshiko Uchida, among them *Journey to Topaz* (1971), *A Jar of Dreams*

(1981), and *The Bracelet* (1993). Laurence Yep documents the Chinese immigrant's experience in America with fine books like *Dragon's Gate* (1993), an account of the deplorable treatment of Chinese laborers who worked on the Sierra Nevada cut of the transcontinental railway in 1867. Jamake Highwater (1977) speaks for Native Americans in *Anpao: An American Indian Odyssey*, as does Michael Dorris (1992) in *Morning Girl*.

Although fictional children's literature may be moving toward representation of the parallel cultures of the United States, it still has a long way to go. Most multicultural publications today are folktales. "Desperately lacking are realistic stories of what it's like to be a child of a minority culture within the mainstream culture," says Ronald Jobe, a Canadian who is past president of the International Board on Books for Young People. "African American picture books have more realism, but a lot of them are historical. Kids need hard-hitting books of today available for all cultures" (White, 1999, p.59). Many cultures—Hispanic, Filipino, Korean, among them—remain, in the 1990's, underrepresented or not represented at all in children's book publishing.

Fantasy in the nineteen forties and fifties consisted mainly of the retelling of traditional tales, new stories in folktale style, tales of talking beasts and inanimate objects personified, and stories of miniature people. Notable among the latter is *The Borrowers* (Norton, 1953), the first of a popular series. Important change occurred with the publication of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) and *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula LeGuin (1968). Science fantasy had made its significant beginnings and, as with the advent of the realistic book featuring the direct speech of Salingeresque anti-heroes, the story began to be rewritten.

The story of course is the ubiquitous, adventurous quest of the hero, "the master story of Western civilization" (Hourihan, 1997, p.233). The majority of children's stories, both fantasy and realism, display its pattern, from the tales of the epic heroes like Jason and Hercules to that of Max in *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963). Earlier manifestations of the story feature the protagonist—usually male—conquering, dominating, overcoming, triumphing, secure in the knowl-

edge that his cause is just, his actions justified.

Pointing to such stories as *Julie of the Wolves* (George, 1972), *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987), *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Wizard of Earthsea*, Margery Hourihan (1997) sees a movement away from the absolutism inherent in the traditional quest of the hero. "It is possible to retain the linear pattern of the hero tale ... without reaffirming the traditional dualisms that have shaped our thinking. In these stories the protagonists are not fanatical men of action, noted for their outstanding prowess and courage, guided by single-minded devotion to their goals, struggling against opponents whom they condemn as evil, and determinedly asserting their mastery ... They are not invulnerable to doubt, disappointment, and defeat. They are not superheroes. They are like all the rest of us, and they include females, non-Europeans and other outsiders" (p. 233).

Children's literature reflects societal turns and changes and these have been nothing if not dramatic over the past five decades. Since the forties we have experienced wars and cold war, political and sexual revolutions, urbanization and suburbanization, tremendous advances in transportation and communication, and in matters of technology, seen the exotic cell phones, television, computers, the internet-become commonplace. There has been an increasing interest in the psychology of human behavior. Gender roles are not as well-defined as in the 1950's. Families are differently constituted. In relationships between the generations, where once respect for authority was taken for granted, now it must be earned. Absolute codes of behavior no longer obtain. In one way or another, these realities find their way into children's books.

Fantasy elements in a number of children's books, notably those by Zilpha Keatly Snyder and Marilyn Sachs, are neither magical nor supernatural, but emerge as manifestations of characters' mental distress. Donna Napoli (1996) takes characters from old tales, such as the witch in "Rapunzel," and shows us the motivation for their behavior in novels for older readers that combine psychology and magical realism.

In a discussion of change in Susan Cooper's fantasy literature, as exemplified by Cooper's *The Boggart* (1993), Carole Scott (1997) shows how Cooper humorously incor-

porates modern technological 'magic' into this recent fantasy. *The Boggart*, a magical creature of Celtic myth, finding himself stranded in North America, arranges to be mailed home to Britain by first transcribing himself onto a computer disk. "Susan Cooper's fantasy works reflect the evolution of modern-day thinking, from the initial breaking of traditional boundaries experienced in the 1940's, to the current situation, where innovations unbelievable in the recent past have revolutionized human communication and the concept of the universe. As fantasy prefigures reality, the line between ordinary life and magic blurs, requiring a concurrent shift in fantasy literature." (Scott, 1997, p. 96)

Such books as *Radiance Descending* (Fox, 1997) *Sun and Spoon* (Henkes, 1997), *The Watcher* (Howe, 1997), and *Wringer* (Spinelli, 1997) record paradigm shifts in what is considered acceptable in family relationships and in notions of 'right' and 'wrong' behavior. We see children rejecting their parents' viewpoints when these conflict with their own; we note how the children in these stories are essentially decent people who make their own decisions and take responsibility for them. They are remarkably mature and independent individuals who don't look to anyone but themselves to solve their problems. They tend to regard more in sorrow than in anger the adults in their lives who fail or disappoint them.

### **Illustrated books: Stories, concepts, information**

*Children and Books* (Sutherland, 1997) is in its ninth edition. Setting the 1997 version of this 'bible' of children's literature alongside the first edition of 1957 (Arbuthnot) gives some indication of how advances in print technology have brought us to a golden age of visually striking books. The 1997 edition is filled with full-color illustrations; in the 1957 edition, illustrations, like many of the picture books of its time, are in black and white. Colorful illustrations, as well as inventive charts, graphs, and maps have been a particular benefit in informational books, serving both to appeal and to clarify complex concepts.

Of course, color alone can't save a mediocre informational book. Exhaustive research, then skill in selecting the key points to present in an introductory text, and finally, the ability

to engage young readers through fine writing are criteria for creating good informational books in any decade. An impressive roster of outstanding writers wrote non-fiction in the nineteen forties and fifties. Irving Adler, Glen Blough, James Daugherty, Holling C. Holling, Patricia Lauber, Millicent Selsam, Katherine Shippen, Herbert Zim, to name a few, provided for young readers concepts in science and social studies presented simply but never simplistically.

Today, books of information are big business. More and better ones than ever before appear prominently on major publishers' annual lists. Conceived by seasoned professional writers, they are well-researched, well-written, well-designed. The widespread movement to teach science and social studies with works of literature rather than with the traditional textbook surely has contributed to the wealth of informational books available. Inventive informational books introduce unusual off-curriculum topics, as absorbing or intriguing as a made-up story and in fact preferred over fiction by many children.

Representative of the literature meant to supplant or supplement textbooks are the works of Seymour Simon, author of over one hundred and fifty science books for children. *Muscles: Our Muscular System* (1998) is one in his series of illustrated books about the human body. A master of clear, concise text, Simon, like many authors today, uses the latest technology to create pictures that complement and elucidate his writing. He explains in a photography note in *Muscles*: "Scientists are using fantastic new machines that peer inside the human body to picture the invisible and help doctors save lives. In this book, we see extraordinary views of the interior of the human body" (Front Matter).

The gifted artist and author, Diane Stanley, received in 1997 the National Council of Teachers of English Orbis Pictus Award for Excellence in Non-Fiction for one of her pictorial biographies, *Leonardo da Vinci*. In *Joan of Arc* (1998), she again demonstrates her ability to bring life to historical figures through careful research, engrossing narrative, and magnificent pictures. Other master writers of history and biography include Russell Freedman, Milton Meltzer, and Jim Murphy. Their work is characterized by meticulous research,

inclusion in their texts facsimiles of primary documents and copies of old prints, and a dramatic narrative rich in detail.

Murphy's *A Young Patriot: The American Revolution as Experienced by One Boy* (1996) is an excellent example. We see the action through the eyes of a fifteen-year-old boy, Joseph Plumb Martin; we hear his actual words. The fact that the young soldier actually existed lends an element of human interest to the well-documented account. There is no doubt that children would not only prefer *A Young Patriot* over a traditional textbook but also would absorb more than mere facts from this evocative presentation of history.

Pop-up books, lift-the-flap books, and those fitted with cunning die-cut peepholes, made possible and affordable through advanced technology for book-making, typically are little more than toylike diversions. However, if Nancy Willard (1995) composes a poetic text to go with splendid pop-up pictures that truly elucidate the workings of Gutenberg's press, we have a new rendering of the genre, worthy to be called book. Young browsers in the lift-the-flap book, *I Wonder What's Under There? A Brief History of Underwear* (Lattimore, 1998), curiosity piqued, may be moved to research further the subject of clothing, inner and outer, ancient and modern. Or they might be intrigued by the title of one of James Cross Giblin's many informative and entertaining books: *Be Seated: A Book About Chairs* (1993).

The blurring of the boundaries between genres being a postmodern tendency, it's not surprising to find a considerable number of illustrated books that do not conform to a single genre. Diane Siebert's *Heartland* (1989) is one example. A poetic text combines with paintings by Wendell Minor to evoke the essence of America's heartland even as facts are gleaned from words and pictures. *Call Me Ahnighito* (Conrad, 1995) tells the true story of how the famous meteorite that sits in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City was discovered by Robert E. Peary and, with great difficulty, transported there. Richard Egielski provides paintings that support the 'autobiographical' narrative which begins: "They call me Ahnighito. And they tell me I am made of star stuff, but I don't remember my birth."

Laurence Pringle's *An Extraordinary Life: The Story of a Monarch Butterfly* (1997) is meticulously researched and scientifically accurate. Yet he chooses to personalize his factual account, giving a human name to one of the butterflies whose flight he follows from Massachusetts to Mexico. Lois Ehlert typically includes in the works of art that are her picture books, pictorial glossaries and factual explanations of items and concepts introduced in the text, which may be either poetry or prose. Officially historical fiction, *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1998) is a series of diary entries that are also poems.

Annually, publishers release a flood of picture story books. We are awash in countless retellings of folk and fairy tales, their texts seldom distinguished but their illustrations often pleasing enough. Inevitably, among these books appear fashionably fractured versions of the old tales or versions that have been politically *corrected*. Then there are 'experimental' texts such as those of Chris Raschka; the text for his innovative book on *Thelonius Monk* (1997) is meant to be sung, the tune coded by colors. But, not every new book by an established artist is memorable, including some by the master, William Steig, and Raschka's recent *Arlene Sardine* (1998). The truth is that dozens of the books with titles like *Juice the Pig* (Osborne, 1996), *Bow-Wow Birthday* (Wardlaw, 1998), and *Good Knight* (Rymill, 1998) are glossy dross. Where picture story books are concerned, perhaps the motto for the millennium might be "Less is More."

### THE FUTURE

In a short story by Isaac Asimov (1968), set in 2155, two children, who have never before seen a book, find an old one in the attic. "What a waste," says Tommy. "When you're through with the book, you just throw it away, I guess. Our television screen must have had a million books on it and it's good for plenty more. I wouldn't throw it away" (unpaged).

The children find it odd to read words that stand still instead of moving- "the way they were supposed to"-on a screen. Will it come to this? Will all books eventually be electronic? Certainly this revolution will not occur all at once nor for some time. But electronic texts are already in use and their further

development can be expected. One interesting aspect of them is their interactivity.

The notion of interacting with and altering a text fits well with literary theory that places the reader before the text. According to reader response theory, reading involves a transaction with a text, an interpretation of it in terms of an individual's personal experience. There is no meaning in a given text by itself, reader response theorists insist; it is the reader who brings meaning to it. Interactive literature for the computer transfers this theory into action. As children read a story on their computer monitor, they are invited to participate in composing it with a range of activities. They may be asked to predict what will happen next in the story or be invited to choose from a selection of choices an alternate ending. The idea that a reader creates each text anew finds added significance through the collaborative composing of writer and reader.

It is easy to predict that technology will affect the production and consumption of children's literature. We've seen how sophisticated advances in book-making have made possible the striking beauty and special effects in many new books. One can read a book online. However, computers are not yet portable, while tape recorders and CD players are. Audiotaped books make it possible to 'read' while riding one's bike or doing chores. Recorded Books, Incorporated, of Prince Frederick, Maryland specializes in producing unabridged presentations by skilled readers of a wide variety of children's and young adults' books. The Weston Woods Company of Weston, Connecticut has had a long and successful record in the production of fine audio- and videotapes of picture books.

The attributes of postmodernism are seen everywhere in the society. These include iconoclastic tendencies and a movement away from absolutism in morals and behavior. Outrageous behavior is the ideal; flouting 'good taste' is a game to play. In fact, the notion that there is such a thing as good taste is questioned. A magazine (*People*, July 26, 1999, p. 12) shows body odor ads that prominently feature a cabinet stocked with perfume and condoms, asking "Odor Ads: A Fragrant Violation of Decency?" The recent film, *Lake Placid*, tries for humor through gratuitous "dirty talk" by an old woman. Human excrement is a *charac-*

ter in an episode of the serialized television cartoon, *South Park*.

Children's delight in the cynical disrespect of Bart Simpson of Matt Groening's *The Simpsons* and in the far-from-innocent observations and activities of the children in the cartoon *South Park*, their enjoyment of the innuendo and outright smut of television's *Beavis and Butthead*, suggest that children growing up with such fare are unlikely to tolerate less sensational literature. Jerry Griswold (1997) makes the point that Stephen Spielberg's, *Hook*, to be acceptable to its audience, had to do more than simply the original James Barrie story on film. "What was additionally needed in Spielberg's film was a parodistic overlay, the insertion of the fast mouth and witticisms of Robin Williams" (p.40). This implies that children and young adults, growing increasingly sophisticated and cynical, are likely in the future to turn away from literature that is anything less than slick and smart-mouthed.

This is unlikely. Children have always enjoyed entertainment low on the literary scale, especially if it outrages or disgusts their elders. Decades ago, my parents worried that my literary and moral development would be permanently stunted by my constant reading of comic books. They would have worried more, had they known that I and my friends surreptitiously swapped books of absolutely no literary value containing information the adults in our lives would have censored. We survived. Besides, to develop taste in reading matter, one must experience the product at all its levels: from awful, through mediocre, to superb. Children may find the mediocre and the awful without us, but they need knowledgeable adults to lead them to the superb.

Children by nature love stories and enjoy intriguing books of information. If we want them to read in the new millennium, we must see that they are introduced to the best of these. Gazing at spines of books in the library will not make readers of them. Hearing about good books from other readers—their peers, librarians, teachers, parents—will. A teacher in one of the graduate classes I taught was challenged with a sixth grade filled with reluctant readers. Guided by a survey of their interests, and through research and reading, she developed a

list of novels and proceeded to read segments of them aloud to her class during book talks. The results of this concerted effort astounded her. The children weren't against reading; they hadn't known, before she convinced them, that there were books so good they *had* to read them.

The future of reading by children depends upon providing books for *all* readers. We are still far from this goal. "When it comes to multicultural literature, *all* groups are underpublished," says Philip Lee, of Lee and Low, publishers of multicultural children's literature (Sloan, 1999). "While demographics show that the population is more diverse, the publishing industry continues to be slow in responding to this change ... There is [besides] a great lack of diversity within publishing personnel. To my knowledge, there are only four Asian American editors, less than ten African American editors, and no Hispanic editors among the major publishing houses" (p. 32). One hopes that the future will see these inequities rectified.

Children's literature is a barometer for the society. The underrepresentation of some ethnic groups in children's books reflects underrepresentation of these groups in areas other than publishing. There is a postmodern tendency to subvert convention and to question what is taken for granted. These tendencies, which we have already in children's literature, along with the postmodern blurring of genre borders, are likely to continue.

Some critics believe that the distance between children's and adult's literature grows ever less. "In the postmodern replay of Dada and surrealism in children's literature, I find reflected the same questioning of social and symbolic hierarchies and power structures, the same fragmentation and absence of closure, the same self-reflection, and the same metaphorical language that characterized modernist adult literature..." (Metcalf, 1997, p.54). This is probably true. After all, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997), with its sequels, now are included in *The New York Times* bestseller list that previously featured only books for grownups.

Certainly, children's literature continues to become more open in its response to the rapid changes in aspects of the global society.

Like the children who live, because of television and other news media, with adult awareness in a far-from-perfect world, it cannot be naive. Honesty and maturity must characterize future children's literature. Children will insist on it.

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