

# **Children's Literature and Social Change**

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## **Introduction**

When it comes to educating children, media tools are an inevitable and integral part of the pedagogical plan. In this present age of technological advancement, teaching strategies frequently make use of screen media such as television, the Internet and, to some extent, video gaming. However, this also means that print media such as literature are regarded as less significant and are put aside. Although I recognize the profound changes in effect, I do not feel incredibly intimidated by the emergence of new technologies such as the e-reader. At the same time, it feels as though the act of telling stories has differed from the way it was. This may not be an inherently negative thing, but in my mind, the use of technology does not provide the same experience of reading as physical paper books would.

In this paper, I wish to examine the types of children's literature according to the topics that they present. To do this, I will first look at *children*, the intended audience for these books. I will provide definitions of who children are, and what they need for success in life. Next, I will get into the heart of the matter: the *media* and the content within it. It is important to gauge what is considered appropriate for children's books and what themes can have a presence. Finally, it would be crucial to consider the potential *change* that can come from children's literature. This is the point in which I will demonstrate the significance of children's literature as force for positive praxis in the world.

## **Who Are Children?**

The present conceptions about childhood contain remnants of past conceptions, with some differences. Among the classic notions of the child is that he or she is vulnerable and in need of preservation. The many dangers facing them are chiefly formed by adults' fears of the possibility of poor development. Also, the child is realized within the framework of impressionability, meaning that all that is given to them will shape their view of the world. The desire, generally, is to shield the child from that which would potentially distort that view. Adults will also feel the need to filter themselves around children to avoid inspiring any negative imitative behaviour. This leads into the next common trope about the child: the child is always in need of a role model. The ideal role model will be someone to relate to, and will preferably be someone that has already achieved the child's own dreams and aspirations. For example, if the child hopes to become an athlete one day, they would be most likely to watch sports extensively

and follow their favourite athletes. Also, there are generational considerations in discourses about childhood; specifically, that they are a part of a future generation that must be raised to accumulate knowledge so that it may be passed on to the subsequent generation, and so on. The idea is to leave it up those in the future to solve the problems of the present if they have not already been solved.

The child is also keen on interactivity, and, through radical-minded texts, will regard the engagement of language as “another area for playful exploration” (Hunt, 1991, p. 57). Another perspective of the needs of the child comes from Hannah Arendt, who states that “education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it, and by the same token save it from that ruin which except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable” (as quoted by Peterson, COMN 4303 lectures). Essentially, Arendt is stressing the importance of education not simply as a tool for academic advancement, but also as a way to facilitate steps toward the collective goal of a more functional world. While it is important for children to learn basic skills such as language, mathematics and the sciences, they will also need more practical skills and experiences to better understand the world around them. I believe that through literature, children can not only absorb these skills and experiences, but apply them as well. The idea is to allow children to become agents of change – either at a young age or when they are older – and encourage others to do the same.

### **Examining the Media: A History of Children’s Literature**

There are many questions to ask when defining children’s literature. What makes a children’s book? What can children read so that they may take away something valuable? Conversely, what should children be forbidden from reading? Should we keep certain books out of their reach? Classic impressions regarding books for children had mostly dismissed this literary genre as basic and inferior due to its association with a group that has not yet fully developed in age. Some of the most patronizing detractors, such as Benedetto Croce, maintain that writing for an audience of children is far less cerebral and therefore “will never be a true art”. Statements like Croce’s have been rejected by Clifton Fadiman, who argues that children’s literature has a strong tradition of storytelling, and that themes presented can easily resonate with adults as well as children (in Mass, 2001, p. 31). Consider the works of C.S. Lewis and E. Nesbit as examples; Lewis himself declares that he prefers writing children’s stories because “a

children's story is the best art form for something you want to say" (as quoted by Fadiman, in Mass, 2001, p. 34). With Lewis' words in mind, a children's book typically reflects the society in which it is printed, and as time moves forward, children's authors certainly have a lot more to say than before.

Prior to the antiquated attitudes about children's literature, there was no children's literature to speak of in the modern sense of the term. Books were considered to be within the inherent domain of adults, with children sometimes reading along with them to hone their reading skills ("A Historical Overview", in Mass, 2001, p. 13). Mature content was not a major concern, as Victorian-era books tended to be heavily sanitized by today's standards. The closest thing to a children's book at the time was *Aesop's Fables*. Based on a series of ancient Greek fairy tales, the English edition was printed by William Caxton in 1484, shortly after the invention of Gutenberg's printing press. It was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the prospect of writing exclusively for children was seriously considered. Early child-centred books had a very basic approach and sought to teach life lessons such as courtesy, etiquette and the general morals of the time. It would not be surprising to see these qualities as virtuous ones, since that era placed great importance on the moral code of religious doctrine. *Orbus Pictus*, the first children's picture book— as well the first such book to break away from the standard —was published in 1657. Written by Czech author Johann Amos Comenius, this book is comparable to the pictorial encyclopedia of today. Many other books had followed throughout the centuries, making a mark in their own way. Such titles include *Tales of Mother Goose* by Charles Perrault (1729), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865) and *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum (1900).

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century brought a great deal of change to children's literature as it began to be taken more and more seriously as an independent genre. In 1919, the Macmillan Publishing Company created a new children's division, a first for any American publisher. A call for awarding the best in American children's books was answered when the Newbery Medal was founded in 1921, and the Caldecott Medal for picture books soon followed in 1938. In 1924, the Horn Book Magazine, a magazine dedicated to the world of children's literature, made its first publication.

As the genre evolved, so did the books themselves. Titles such as *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown (1947) and *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss (1957) tested the limits to

which children's books were constrained while still remaining loved by many. There were also those books that included more profound themes, such as Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), chronicling a young boy who manages to deal with the products of his imagination. *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume (1970) emphasized the very real struggles that come with growing up, while J.K. Rowling's popular *Harry Potter* franchise took the fantasy novel to new and unexplored places.

### **A Wide Range of Topics**

The landscape of contemporary children's literature has changed greatly since the early days and challenge what is expected of children's authors and their works. The themes that today's books cover are numerous, so I have decided to focus on the five most prominent ones: the roles assigned according to gender, the notion of race, sexuality within the family structure, dealing with physical or learning disabilities and retelling historical events. Although the authors of such books take great care in grasping these topics, there has been some backlash based on the fact that the topic had been grasped at all through this medium. I will examine some works of children's literature and explain how they are connected to their respective themes.

### ***Gender Roles***

The basic rules regarding how to look and behave in accordance with gender norms are taught to children from an early age. Therefore, they will be convinced by the constructions of masculinity and femininity as dictated by the gender binary. This is reinforced throughout the everyday life of the child, including in literature. Frequent conventions, such as the helpless princess awaiting the handsome prince to rescue her, and the male of the household going off to battle while the wife remains at home, are certainly the domain of traditional storytelling. Despite the continued prominence of these tropes, it took until studies conducted in the 1970s to fully acknowledge that "girls were not typically perceived as risk takers, being physically active, or having professional lives" in narratives for children (Ernst, in Lehr, 1995, p. 67). As of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, though, the usual stereotypes have been either subverted or dismissed altogether.

Traditional gender roles have been countered quite well in Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess* (1980), in which a princess is tasked with rescuing a prince by distracting the

dragon that had kidnapped him. She must do this, as she is expected to marry him soon. Her strong sense of wit and act of defiance at the end made this a favourite with readers young and old, including feminist groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). Another story, *William's Doll* by Charlotte Zolotow (1972), centres on a boy who wishes to have a new doll for himself, but his father, reluctant to buy one, offers him a range of other toys instead. The unexpected choice that William makes is indicative of his refusal to be confined to predetermined desires. There is yet another book that breaks this confinement; in this case, standards are defied through clothing options. This book, entitled *My Princess Boy*, was written by Cheryl Kilodavis (2011) and is based on her own son's fascination with wearing clothes associated with girls, including dresses, jewellery, and anything coloured pink. The fact that he is aged four suggests that he would be more likely to let his curiosity guide him in exploring various dimensions of gender identity.

### ***Race Relations***

Although great strides have been made throughout points in history to combat racial discrimination, there are myriad systemic issues that still linger, many of which affect the way in which children's literature is written. For one, there is the issue of representation among characters. This was far more obvious in the past when children's book characters were disproportionately white, as if to promote a default. The result is that any characters of colour would serve as insulting caricatures. Many post-colonial works present a new dilemma: while they celebrate tolerance and difference in ethnicity, they still tend to reinforce hegemonic concepts, placing stereotypes upon the "Other" as a result (Xie, in McGillis, 2000, p. 1). Meanwhile, many children's authors, driven by their own inspiration, have sought to challenge past negative portrayals of people of colour.

*Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman (1991) directly addresses racial identity by focusing on a girl who struggles to fit in with others' expectations of her. Grace's desire is to play the lead role in a theatrical retelling of *Peter Pan* at school. Her classmates discourage her by telling her that because Peter Pan is neither black nor female – and because Grace is both of these – she cannot play that role. Her ambition is reignited after watching a performance by a professional ballet dancer, and her dream is turned to reality when she is chosen for the part. Some stories deal with race relations more indirectly, cleverly using animals as placeholders. One book that

does this is *The Berenstain Bears' New Neighbours*, one out of many Bear family stories by Stan and Jan Berenstain (1994). The Bear family observes as a new family of pandas moves into the house across the street. Everyone is excited to meet the new family, except for Papa Bear, who suddenly raises suspicions towards them for being “too different”. Later, he gives up his prejudices when the two families finally meet and converse with each other. Although racism is never explicitly mentioned in the book, the notion of difference with regard to physical appearance is something that humans can definitely relate to. Still, there are other books that, while not acknowledging one’s race, still make implications about representation through moments of everyday life. Ezra Jack Keats’ *The Snowy Day* (1962) tells a simple story of a boy enjoying himself outside in the snow. The book was noted for being one of the first children’s books to have a non-stereotypical central character of colour. Keats’ decision to make his main character black had to do with his experiences with the ethnic diversity he saw growing up in Brooklyn, New York in addition to addressing a lack of representation.

### ***Sexuality and Family Diversity***

When it comes to being frank with their children about difficult subjects, parents usually develop unique methods to explain the matter. They would use more “kid-friendly” language or make comparisons to things already familiar to them. However, when the topic pertains to sexual orientation, it may go without mention, especially in the company of younger children. If it is ever mentioned, it is often in a condescending way. Perhaps with the exception of gay and lesbian couples, some parents may have reservations about sharing this subject with their children at all, much less through literature. At present, children’s books featuring homosexual parents tend to create great controversy due to persistent fears about the notion of a same-sex couple taking on the role of child-rearing (McClure, in Lehr, 1995, p. 8). Nonetheless, the same books have been met with praise for bringing family diversity into the forefront.

One of the most well-known books for children to feature a same-sex couple is *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman (1989). It depicts a young girl’s experience of being raised by a lesbian couple, and how it is taken by those at her school. Insecurity arises when Heather starts to wonder why she does not have a father like some of her other classmates. Her two mothers console her, reminding her that unconditional love is the only requirement for a healthy family. Michael Willhoite’s *Daddy’s Roommate* (1990) takes a potentially challenging

situation and makes it a positive one. In *Daddy's Roommate*, a boy deals with his parents' divorce, growing accustomed to seeing his mother and father on separate occasions. He notices that at his father's place, there is another man living with him, causing him to ask questions that lead to the discovery that his father is gay. The boy's acceptance of this fact is established by the end of the story. Also, what *The Berenstain Bears' New Neighbours* does for racial prejudice, *And Tango Makes Three* does for family diversity. Based on true events, this story by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (2005) is set in New York's Central Park Zoo, where two male penguins struggle to find a partner during mating season. The two then agree to mate with each other, raising a baby penguin they hatched from another couple's egg.

### ***Physical and Learning Disabilities***

The interest in discussing a physical or learning disability in children's literature has certainly grown throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, which is why the effects that these images have on children remain a subject of much discussion. From the more progressive steps forward come more personal, cultural approaches to disability, rather than medical, scientific ones (Saunders, 2004). Books of this nature can help children who have certain misconceptions about a particular disability and yet are afraid to ask questions. They can equally help children with first-hand experience with a disability gain more insight, whether it is themselves or someone close to them. Authors of recent published works strive to have their readers' interests in mind, imagining that they have been diagnosed with the disability being spoken about in the book.

These books find their own way to explain the disability in question, as is the case in Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen's *We'll Paint the Octopus Red* (1998). The narrator of this story is a girl awaiting the birth of a new baby in the family. In the meantime, she thinks of all the amazing things she would be able to do with her new sibling. Once the baby is born, her father announces that it is a boy, and that he has been born with Down syndrome. Her sudden sense of discouragement is followed by her father's insistence that she can still play with him, but that her experience will be different than she had planned. Another example of the exploration of disability in children's literature can be found in *Moses Goes to a Concert* by Isaac Millman (2002). Moses, who is hard of hearing, regularly communicates using American Sign Language (ASL) to his friends, who are also deaf. A school trip to a concert becomes a fulfilling experience for Moses and his friends. Moses' story is written in plain text and ASL, so that



hearing children can learn a new way to communicate. *Ian's Walk* by Laurie Lears (1998) tells the story of a girl who becomes frustrated when her younger autistic brother Ian pays special attention to small, seemingly insignificant things during a walk outside. Her frustration turns to worry when Ian is lost in the park and subsequently found safely. It just goes to show how misunderstandings can be easily shed through even the most troubling events, if the person is willing to shed them.

### ***Historical Events***

It is said that history is written by the victor, and the telling of past tales will thus be injected with bias. Although this is inevitable, even in children's literature, it will be important for the reader to have a starting point so that they may make up their own minds about the validity of the story. The phenomenon of constructing the past happens when the storyteller speaks of historical events through the lens of the present, revealing just as much about the time in which the story is told as it does about the time in which the story takes place (Taxel, in Lehr, 1995, p. 160). Children's literature is unique in that it can tell a true story as it is or use it as the backdrop for a fictitious story, using terms that are more in tune with today's standards, as the process of constructing the past would dictate.

*Hana's Suitcase* by Karen Levine (2002) tells the actual story of a suitcase unearthed at a children's Holocaust museum in Tokyo in 2000. The suitcase had been written on, and the writing revealed that it belonged to Hana Brady, a young girl whose life had been abruptly changed by the Nazi occupation of her homeland of Czechoslovakia. The book is based on a CBC documentary in which Levine travels to Japan to learn more about Hana's life, and features footage and interviews with the museum curator and Hana's family. While *Hana's Suitcase* places a significant historical event front and centre, other books tend to place it in the background without fully glossing over it. One such story is Ken Mochizuki's *Baseball Saved Us* (1993), told by a Japanese boy forced by American authorities to live in an internment camp during World War II, just after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. With the help of his father, he deals with his ordeal by learning to play – and appreciate – the game of baseball. When his family is released from the camp, he does not fit in with the others at school, but his continued love of baseball is what sustains his pride. Other books, such as *The Story of Ferdinand* by Munro Leaf (1936), are even less explicit in their analysis of history. Taken at face value, it is the story of a

bull named Ferdinand who, despite his large size, is more satisfied with smelling flowers than entering bullfighting competitions. Although *Ferdinand* was written just before the Spanish Civil War, supporters of Francisco Franco's regime saw it as promoting a pacifist agenda, particularly one against said regime. Yet, the book is highly celebrated today as a metaphor for peace in a damaged world.

### **In Closing: A Call for Change**

There are many other books in the sphere of children's literature that are capable of enabling change where change is most necessary. Since children already do require literacy skills, they might as well use practical, innovative stories to encourage action against negative forces affecting people today, thus benefitting themselves and the society around them (Kohl, 2007, p. 46). How such action is encouraged will be perceived differently by adults than they will by children, and may create bitter tension, much of which tends to be fuelled by some parents and educators. This is because adults can read more into the texts they encounter, and will therefore react according to their inherited values and beliefs. Contemporary themes such as gender, race, sexuality, disability, history and others can introduce children to novel ideas. The responsibility of guardians is not to deny children access to these new ideas, for this would only hinder their development. Rather, they are obligated to provide them with varying outlooks on life. Children's literature has proven to be an outstanding way of going about this, as the children that read them can make their own informed decisions as they grow older.

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