

# Children's literature: a survey of definitions from "the lunatic fringe"

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In her article "Why are Americans afraid of dragons?" (1974; rpt. 1979), Ursula K. Le Guin offers a defense of imagination, of children, of "fairy-tale, legend, fantasy, science fiction," and the rest of what she calls "the lunatic fringe" (44). It is not an accident that she sweeps up such an odd group into her protective grasp. As J.R.R. Tolkien in "On fairy-stories" (1947) points out, fairy tales were relegated to Victorian nurseries in the past century, and have until recently been primarily associated with children (57). Furthermore, if one travels a step further back, to the Romantic poets, one finds Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge associating imagination with the child, a trend which has continued to the present day. Children's literature, like the imaginative literatures mentioned above, can, even in these enlightened times, be included in that "lunatic fringe," a fact which is never so apparent as when one attempts to define the term.

A brief survey of definitions must begin with the problems. One finds the question of defining children's literature has been skirted with great dexterity by many journals and students of the field. There are, however, numerous arguments against the negative treatment which children's literature receives from adults. As early as 1947, C.S. Lewis defended children's literature (fantasy in particular) and offered many interesting anecdotes knocking adults who knock children's literature: "A critic not long ago said in praise of a very serious fairy tale that the tongue 'never once got into his cheek!' But why on earth should it? — unless he had been eating a seedcake. Nothing seems to me more fatal, for this art, than an idea that whatever we share with children is, in a privative sense, 'childish,' and that whatever is childish is somehow comic. We must meet children as equals in that area of our nature where we are equals..." (33). Maurice Sendak, in an interview first published in 1971, says: "I would like to see a time when children's books were not segregated from adult books, a time when people didn't think of children's books as a minor art form, a little Peterpanville, a cutesydarling place where you could Have Fun, Laugh Your Head Off. I know so many adult writers whom I would happily chop into pieces, who say, 'Well, I think I'll take a moment and sit down and knock off a kiddy book...' And, of course, they write a lousy book. You hope they will and they do!" (Haviland, 44). In "Children's Literature:

The Bad Seed" (1980), Francelia Butler points out the "deplorable and outdated snobbery of English departments which ignore the field," and suggests that by "failing to study or teach children's literature in a serious way, scholars can do the future generations considerable harm. They leave the field wide open to ignorant critics and pseudoexperts who give bad advice which is passed on to parents and teachers and ultimately affects the psyche of children" (44). To bring the list of complaints up to 1986 — after having successfully defended a department of English master's thesis on Canadian children's fantasy literature, I was asked by a highly esteemed professor, "You are not *really* interested in children's literature, are you?" There are still those who find it unbelievable that anyone might *choose* to dwell on the lunatic fringe.

Many critics, adults, writers, and English department scholars clearly misunderstand the field of children's literature; there are countless other passages which might be quoted to show that "grownups" at large have shown a dogged ignorance of a field which is of such importance, it only they knew. Robert Bator, in *Signposts of criticism of children's literature* (1983), an excellent volume which delves into definitions of and approaches to children's literature, suggests that much of the "critical confusion" and general ignorance about children's literature results from "the failure to define it, including the failure to separate mere books from literature" (xiii).

This failure has arisen, in part, because of the difficulty of defining the two terms involved. Amongst some of the definitions of "child" in the Oxford English Dictionary one finds: "1. Foetus, infant 2. A boy or girl 3. One who is as a child in character, manners, attainments, and *esp.* in experience or judgment." Yes, but one must ask, *what* does "as a child" mean? And can we really see children's literature as books for foetuses? Clearly, the answer is not here. One commonly accepted definition of the child reader is that he or she must be a human being under the age of fifteen. To contradict this, George MacDonald, in the 1890s, argued that he wrote for "the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five" (Sadler, 171). Authors from C.S. Lewis to Maurice Sendak to P.L. Travers agree that "child" is a state of mind conducive to imaginative freedom.

Having addressed *that* part of the definition, one can now turn to literature. One could say literature is a) books b) good books (what is good?) c) "death on paper" (Jody Moon, grade 11 student). Fortunately we do not have to address the issue of "What is Canadian?" here.

One difficulty in defining children's literature, then, lies in the terms themselves; another difficulty lies in the fact that those people whom one would presume would be able to give hints about the definition — the children's authors themselves — all stoutly profess that they have never written books for children: "Nothing I had written before *Mary Poppins*

had anything to do with children and I have always assumed, when I thought about it at all, that she had come out of the same well of nothingness (and by nothingness, I mean no-thingness) as the poetry, myth, and legend that had absorbed me all my life. If I had been told while I was working on the book that I was doing it for children, I think I would have been terrified. How would I have the effrontery to attempt such a thing?" (P.L. Travers, 59) — and — "I don't belong because I don't really write children's books. More accurately, I don't write books for children. Like so many authors, I simply write the book that bangs at my head asking to be written and then my publishers tell me what it is" (Susan Cooper, 98) — and — "I don't write for children specifically. I certainly am not conscious of sitting down and writing a book for children. I think it would be fatal if one did" (Maurice Sendak in "Maurice Sendak with Virginia Haviland," 27). In his article "Status: In and Out of the Literary Sandbox" (1983), Robert Bator points out that similar attitudes are echoed by Arthur Ransome, Meindert De Jong, Lucy Boston, Barbara Wersba, and others. Offering an explanation, Bator writes, "If children's authors seem defensive, they have reason to be. Their chosen field is simultaneously praised and blamed for displaying simplicity, for over-concern with story, for withstanding and for escaping the claws of criticism, for ignoring and for being concerned with audience. Critical confusion keeps children's literature and its artists peripheral" (26). Once again, we are turned out on the lunatic fringe.

Some critics, like the authors, have chosen to avoid definition. Once again, Bator writes, "In a recent book of criticism of juvenile literature, the author flatly assumes 'we all have a pretty good idea of what children's literature includes' and lets the matter rest there. In early issues of *The Horn Book Magazine*, a leading children's journal begun in 1924, no examination of what constitutes a book for children was found. But we are assured, because busy people do not waste time on questions of classification which are not giving them any trouble, this is 'not a serious omission' (5). Like *Horn Book Magazine*, *Canadian Children's Literature* itself has never, to this point, specifically addressed this question. As Bator suggests, definition is "invariably dismissed" by many critics as "rigid" (6).

Given all of the above difficulties, however, there are a few courageous students of children's literature who have attempted definition. The most generally accepted and most general definition is "children's literature is literature." Basically agreeing with this, Eleanor Cameron suggests that children's literature "does not exist in a world of its own, but is enmeshed in a larger world of literature" (Yolen, 2). Along the same lines, Sheila Egoff in *Thursday's child* (1981) writes, "Children's literature has two basic characteristics: it is writing *for* children (that is, people up to the early teens) and it is intended to be read as literature and not only for

information and guidance" (1). These definitions rest on the assumption that there is a distinction between children's books and children's literature. As Francelia Butler points out "Many children's books *are* trash — but so are many books for adults. I said 'books' advisedly, because no real distinction is attempted yet between children's literature of high seriousness and books that are trivial — at least no such distinction is attempted by most scholars in English departments" (38).

Moving from the general to a more strictly delimited definition, John Rowe Townsend writes, "In dealing with current output, I came to the conclusion that, absurd as it might seem, the only workable definition of a children's book was 'a book that appeared on the children's list of a publisher'" (19). The problems inherent here are numerous — obviously, publishers are not always the best literary critics, their lists being dictated by multiple concerns, including the popular trends of the day.

Critics such as Myles McDowell offer definitions by listing particular traits. He writes, "children's books are generally shorter; they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism which much adult fiction ignores; children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order; probability is often disregarded; and one could go on endlessly talking of magic, and fantasy, and simplicity and adventure" (141). Inevitable, such lists will make some critics uncomfortable. When McDowell suggests that children's books are generally shorter, one thinks of the thousand or so pages of Tolkien's *Lord of the rings* which has a broad children's audience and which was included in Ruth Nadelman Lynn's *Fantasy for children: an annotated checklist and reference guide* (1983). Or, when McDowell suggests that children's literature has little description, one thinks of the long passages in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne* books describing the White Way of Delight, the Haunted Wood, the Lake of Shining Waters. All the same, definitions which list traits *are* helpful, if only to establish rough guidelines; they provide critical vocabulary and tools with which to explore given areas.

Critic Aidan Chambers in "The reader in the book: notes from work in progress" (1977) offers a critical approach to children's literature, and in so doing, provides another definition dependent upon traits or characteristics. He suggests that in writing a book, an author necessarily creates an 'implied reader' and that if one examines this reader, one can determine the genre to which the book belongs. Chambers writes, "In books where the implied reader is a child, authors tend to reinforce the relationship by adopting in their second self-giving the book, if you prefer — a very sharply focused point of view. They tend to achieve that focus by putting at the

centre of the story a child through whose being everything is seen and felt" (131). Once again we find McDowell's "child protagonists are the rule." And once again, we find the definition of children's literature lies within each individual book; we are dependent upon both the subjectivity and wisdom of the critic, who must determine what constitutes the "implied reader" in children's literature.

Given, then, that children's literature is literature and has particular, if variable, traits, one can extrapolate further. If literature is placed on a continuum, moving from non-fiction to fiction, with separate genres located along the way, one might at first assume that children's literature would be placed somewhere along the line as a branch of literature. This would, however, ignore that fact that as in adult literature, there are many types of children's books — realistic fiction, problem novels, historical fiction, science fiction, fantasy, picture books, and so on. It is inadequate to use the same critical vocabulary or method in analyzing George MacDonald's *At the back of the north wind* (1871) and Dr. Seuss' *Green eggs and ham* (1960). More appropriately, then, one might argue that children's literature runs the gamut of adult literature, on a parallel course, and that a vertical line could be drawn linking the adult and children's corresponding genres. There are, of course, particular genres or particular traits which are found primarily in adult or children's literature; erotica, for example, belongs exclusively to adult literature, while the modern picture book is generally directed toward children. All the same, the genres which both literatures have in common — historical fiction, realistic fiction, fantasy, and so on — would benefit from shared critical vocabulary and method. As C.S. Lewis points out, an author's "fantasies for children and his fantasies for adults will have very much more in common with one another than either has to do with ordinary novel or with what is sometimes called 'the novel of life' " (28). To avoid the danger of forgetting that adult and children's literatures run *separate*, if parallel, courses, the children's literature critic could simultaneously explore specific children's literature traits, such as those outlined by McDowell.


One might say, then, that children's literature *is* that magic and lunatic fringe which rises out of and descends into the horizon of adult literature. It can and should be defined in an effort to chart its parameters and to ensure that it will not be dismissed by those who live safely in the central regions.

## NOTES


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