



## **Confirming the Place of Children's Literature Studies in the Academy**

—Andrew O'Malley

Hunt, Peter, ed. *The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. 1040 pp. \$485.95 hc. ISBN 0415290538.

Two welcome texts in the ongoing struggle to consolidate the place of children's literature as a discipline of scholarly rigour within the academy have recently been published. The first is a much expanded and updated second edition of *The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*. In its introductory essay, Margaret Meek disavows the normal boundary-establishing function of an encyclopedia in favour of a "deliberate untidiness, an openness" (l: 2) that will allow the contours and directions of the discipline to shift. This substantial (now two-volume) collection of 112 essays must, nonetheless, be understood as an effort to map out the current field of children's literature

Zipes, Jack, general ed. *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature: The Traditions in English*. New York and London: W. W. Norton 2005. 2471 pp. \$91.00 hc. ISBN 03937538x.

research and to lend it some of the seriousness people—both inside and outside the discipline—have often considered it to be missing. The second book is an anthology, *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature: The Traditions in English*, itself a form of text often invested with similar discipline-shaping power, as anthologies generally aim to collect a body of primary texts representative of the materials scholars and teachers in the field think worthy of study. As with the *International Companion Encyclopedia*, the editors of this anthology do not aim at boundary-setting or canon-formation (although these effects can't be avoided to some degree in such an enterprise), opting instead for what they call a "balance [of] the

classic and emergent" (xxxiii).

Peter Hunt, editor of the *ICECL*, has clearly listened to and tried to address criticisms of the text's first edition, especially those of such scholars as Meena Khorana, who found that it failed to meet its promise of a truly international picture of the field. In his new preface, Hunt acknowledges that the book remains Anglocentric, remarking that this is perhaps inevitable in an English-language text, but hopes that the second edition will at least suggest "where links might be made or common ground found" between the work presented here and work done in other languages (xix). Part V, "National and International," most reflects these efforts, having been expanded considerably to include seventeen more entries on countries and regions, mostly non-European. There are also valuable additions to already existing entries, such as an "overview" essay on African children's literature. Roderick McGillis' new essay, "Postcolonialism," is a welcome addition as well, given the ascendancy of this theoretical framework not just in children's literature, but in literary and cultural studies more generally. To my mind, however, this entry would have been better placed in the first (and thus implicitly privileged) section, "Theory and Practice," as this would help demonstrate the move out of the margins of this approach and body of texts. As it is, McGillis' essay sits a little uncomfortably alongside Sheila Ray's

(unrevised) "The World of Children's Literature." The latter uses a kind of evolutionary model to describe the global development of children's literature, a model which itself has potentially troubling colonial echoes. A perhaps less visible, but I think highly strategic, change comes in the form of reordering the national literatures entries in Part V. In the first edition, the entries on the British Isles came first, followed by European entries (roughly organized from north to south), then "non-European countries," with the entries on the Americas rounding out the collection. Entries are now arranged in a more neutral alphabetical order.

Part I, Theory and Critical Approaches has also undergone significant and positive revision. Emer O'Sullivan's article on "Internationalism and the Universal Child" is an excellent replacement for Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's ambivalent evaluation of the discipline's problems of definition in the first edition. Lesnik-Oberstein's earlier essay was largely concerned with demonstrating the limitations and impossibilities (à la Jacqueline Rose) of the field; many of her observations are important, but the overall effect was almost to foreclose discussion on the possibilities the field offers, or on how its limitations can be productively addressed. O'Sullivan's piece raises questions that are germane to both the *ICECL* and the field as a whole, about universalism in the context of children, their literature, and its history. She rightly

points out how the idea of “international classics” of children’s writing “serve[s] as an instrument of cultural hegemonism” (I: 21). The fact that she does not shy away from direct critiques of the work of such major figures in the field as Zohar Shavit and Maria Nikolajeva (both of whom have pieces in the *ICECL*) is refreshing, and serves as an important reminder that a healthy discipline has divisions and disagreements that generate vigorous debate.

Again, much of value has been added to the second edition (David Rudd’s “Theorising and Theories,” an even-handed discussion of the usually polarized debate between social constructivist and biologist theories of childhood, comes to mind), and many earlier essays have been usefully revised by their original authors. There are still, however, some fairly glaring instances of where the work of updating has not been done as well as one could have hoped. For example, the flagship introduction by Margaret Meek has not been changed at all since the 1996 edition, not even so much as to correct references to “this book” or “this volume” to reflect that the new edition is a two-volume text. As a result, some of its observations do not stand up very well in light of more recent developments both in the field and in the actual culture of childhood. For example, I’m not convinced that it can still rightly be said that “reading-response theory has become the most frequently quoted theoretical position in relation to

books for children” or that feminist interrogations of children’s texts can be seen as a new development (I: 9, 8). As well, there is no mention of, for example, video games, which clearly now outpace virtually any other form of narrative-based entertainment consumed by children.

As was the case with the first edition, entries—new and old—in all five sections are sometimes uneven. Biases, even in the ostensibly objective form of the encyclopedia entry, are to be expected, but in some cases these seem to elide important information. For example, one of the most important children’s books in twentieth-century Iran, *The Little Black Fish* (read by many as an allegory of repression under the last Shah’s regime), receives no mention in Morteza Khosronejad’s entry on that country, and its author, Samad Behrangi, is quickly dismissed: “[his] work became entangled in his Marxist ideology and remained barren” (II: 1095). The fact that most Iranians of Behrangi’s generation, and the next, know this book, and the fact that it represents a rare and remarkable example of the political potential of children’s literature (possessing the book could have resulted in incarceration under the Shah’s regime) surely merits mention. By contrast, Mavis Reimer’s new entry on English Canadian books is a great improvement over its predecessor, striking, to my mind, an ideal balance between a necessarily descriptive, historical overview and a convincing

analysis of how Canadian children's books tend in general to mobilize the idea of "home" toward certain ideological ends. A fully articulated argument is neither expected nor desired of entries in such an encyclopedia as this, but they should aspire to more than the mere list of chronologically arranged texts, which, for example, the new entry on "Contemporary Comics" in Part II, "Forms and genres" offers.

This second section has some very welcome additions, such as "War," "Horror," and "Series Fiction," as well as a piece on "Crossover Literature," in which Rachel Falconer looks at the increasing trend in narratives (film and books, here) to move between child and adult audiences, and speculates about how this phenomenon can open up a "more dialogic understanding of children's and adults' cultures" (I: 572). That the entry on "Pony Stories" still remains is a little puzzling, since, as a few reviewers of the first edition observed, this seems such a peculiarly British subgenre. Indeed, this section continues to exhibit the previously critiqued Anglocentrism of the text, as the generic divisions tend to reflect largely British and North American literary styles, conventions, and developments.

Gathering representative examples and demonstrating the historical and cultural importance of the major genres and conventions of English-language children's books are things the *Norton Anthology of Children's Literature: The Traditions in*

*English* achieves admirably. Editors Jack Zipes, Lissa Paul, Lynne Valone, Peter Hunt, and Gillian Avery have compiled a text that should go a long way to realizing the goal of demarginalizing the discipline of children's literature studies within the academy. As the editors observe in their preface, a serious anthology is one necessity for a discipline to be taken seriously, and this thorough volume of carefully chosen and organized primary texts and insightful introductory essays is indeed serious.

As the editors remark, the tendency of many earlier anthologies of children's literature was to "establish values and standards for judging what was the best in the field" (xxx). This has continued to be the case as recently as 2000, judging, for example, by the selection criteria of the fifth edition of Prentice Hall's *Classics of Children's Literature*. Here, as the preface indicates, the aim is to present readers with "immortal works" that "demonstrat[e] the dignity, vitality, and durability of children's classics in the Western tradition" (xvii). Indeed, it can be said that it is precisely this sort of canonizing impulse in the study of children's literature that has contributed to the impression that the field is out of step with the concerns of modern literature and cultural studies departments. The desire to view children's books as "immortal" or "timeless" and thus outside or beyond the specificities of the times and places in which they are produced reinforces the ideological assumption

of childhood itself as a universal category rather than one contingent on historical and cultural specificities. The editors of the *Norton* are surely taking an important corrective step in being guided instead by their attention to the “social and cultural conditions that affect childhood” and that have always motivated writing for children (xxxi).

The chronological and generic organization of the anthology’s seventeen sections is logical and achieves the stated goal of “map[ping] the ways in which the history of children’s literature fits into the history of Anglo-American literature unmarked as being for children” (xxxiii). By foregrounding the link between writing for children and writing in general over history, the anthology strengthens its case for inclusion in general survey courses offered by universities. As well, by including sections on such popular forms as chapbooks, legends, and comics, and such popular crossover genres as science fiction and adventure stories, this anthology opens up possibilities for the inclusion of children’s texts in popular literature/culture courses and in cultural studies work more generally. However, at a list price of \$91.00 CDN, it may prove too expensive to act as anything but the main textbook for children’s literature courses. Even if ambitions to find a place for itself on the syllabi of courses outside the field don’t bear fruit, the *Norton* will prove an invaluable choice for children’s literature instructors, as it

could act as the main text in a wide variety of post-secondary children’s literature courses. It is most obviously suited to a general survey of writing for children in English over history, but as each of its sections contains a complete text of a major work accompanied by generous and judiciously chosen excerpts from what the editors call “satellite” texts, it could also work in more specialized children’s literature courses on genre (such as, for example, poetry, or young adult fiction, or fairy tales) or period. The Norton website (which I found very slow and difficult to navigate) offers a variety of useful sample outlines for courses that imagine the *Norton Anthology* as a primary text.

These are both important texts, valuable not just as teaching and research resources for those already working in the field, but as the kinds of substantial tomes a discipline needs, frankly, in order to give both its supporters and its detractors a sense of its real weight. To see collected such a tremendous range of topics with which the field of children’s literature studies concerns itself, and to see anthologized its rich and lengthy English-language tradition I found very heartening and impressive, even if such efforts inevitably fail at full inclusion and representation. Given the position of children’s literature studies in most academic institutions, it is worth running the exclusionary, institutionalizing, and canonizing risks associated with these sorts of textual enterprises. I

imagine and hope that the criticism and debate these texts will generate will serve to further expand the

field of children's literature and culture studies and to confirm its value to the academy.

### Works Cited

Behrangi, Samad. *The Little Black Fish*. 1968. Bethesda, MD: Ibex Publishing, 1997.

Griffith, John W. and Charles H. Frey, eds. *Classics of Children's Literature*. 5th ed.. Upper-Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000.

Khorana, Meena. "From the Margins to the Mainstream?" *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 24:3 (1999): 148–151.

Andrew O'Malley is an Associate Professor in the English Department at the University of Winnipeg, where he teaches courses in Children's Literature and the Eighteenth Century. His book, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* was published by Routledge in 2003.