

## An Introduction to Children's Literature

Peter Hunt

Oxford University Press 1994

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A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2016 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

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Hunt offers a lively and opinionated history of children's literature, covering the obvious material but offering distinctive ideas about both individual works and writers and ways of approaching the genre.

A brief introduction looks at boundaries and definitions and at the relationship of children's literature with literary criticism. Hunt takes what he has called a 'childist' approach, emphasizing the "inevitable mismatch between the adult-generated text and the child-perceived text". But his is very much a "bottom-up" approach, "looking at the texts that have been, and are, considered to be 'for' children, and then examining any useful generalizations that can be made".

So the central three-quarters of the *Introduction* is taken up by a history of children's literature, in five chapters: an overview in "History and Histories", then the chronological "The Early History of Children's Literature", "Maturity, 1860-1920", "The Long Weekend, 1920-1939" and "Equal Terms: 1940 to the Present". This offers some commentary on general trends and the social and technological background:

"In children's reading, there was a rapid expansion of both the middle-class 'respectable' market — in 1875, Routledge could print a catalogue of 1,000 children's books — and the penny dreadfuls. Why did this happen? The period between 1860 and the outbreak of the First World War saw some dramatic social and political shifts. Families became smaller and more stable, major artistic movements such as the Pre-Raphaelites legitimized the vein of fantasy that parallels Victorian utilitarianism; the Empire, at its peak, began to seem a little less sure of itself; and women's position in society was changing subtly. Books became cheaper with the introduction of the Hoe cylinder press in the 1860s, cardboard book covers in the 1870s, and inexpensive pulp paper in the 1880s."

But it is mostly a survey of major writers and key books — also touching on educational "readers", popular writers now consigned to the second rank,

and the popular press — with some nice short summaries of careers and bodies of work.

"If Stevenson represents the summing up of the sea story and nineteenth-century adventure story, and looks forward to a new depth in children's books, the country writer Richard Jefferies wrote one novel that was probably intended for children, *Wood Magic* (1881), a very turgid, uneven, and depressive performance, largely a beast fable, not much admired even among Jefferies's devotees. *Bevis, the Story of a Boy* (1882) is, on the other hand, a classic case of a book about childhood that has been adopted by childhood, and, as Carpenter notes, the first two or three chapters contain 'the best pieces of description of a child's imaginative life ever printed'."

"Of the 'realist' artists, who chart day-to-day lives of children, Shirley Hughes stands out. Hughes began as a book-illustrator, working in fine line (in the tradition of the Brocks) on books by Mayne and others, but her later work has been largely in colour. She chronicles with a very perceptive eye the lives of respectable urban and suburban Victorian-terrace streets with her 'Lucy and Tom' books, beginning with *Lucy and Tom's Day* (1960), and the Alfie and Annie Rose series, beginning with *Alfie Gets in First* (1982). The wordless *Up and Up* (1979), and the experimental *Chips and Jessie* (1985), which combines the cartoon strip with standard text, stand beside classically rounded family tales such as *Dogger* (1977) and the six remarkable miniatures of the *Nursery Collection* (1985-6)."

A chapter "Uses and Abuses, Themes and Variations" picks out some broad themes and questions. Can children's literature be realistic, and is it better if it is? What is behind the British tendency to fantasy, in contrast to Australian or American writing, and how does that involve landscapes and journeys? Is reading best taught through "literature" or using graded readers? Is there a place for work in children's literature?

And in his conclusion Hunt reiterates that "arguments about what books should contain, whether they are for education or for 'literary' responses (or both, or neither), are ideological". And he accepts, but also makes explicit, "the assumption that children's books lead on to adult books, that good books and/or good habits of reading will lead to a literary, literate life ... and that that is a good thing of itself".

Hunt's *Introduction* has nothing, obviously, on works from the last quarter century. It is also dated in that its ideas are now more mainstream than

they were, to some extent because of Hunt's own influence. But it's a provocative and entertaining read, which should be enjoyed by anyone with any curiosity about children's literature.

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