



Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter

Seth Lerer

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Ever since children have learned to read, there has been children's literature. *Children's Literature* charts the makings of the Western literary imagination from Aesop's fables to Mother Goose, from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to Peter Pan, from *Where the Wild Things Are* to Harry Potter.

The only single-volume work to capture the rich and diverse history of children's literature in its full panorama, this extraordinary book reveals why J. R. R. Tolkien, Dr. Seuss, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Beatrix Potter, and many others, despite their divergent styles and subject matter, have all resonated with generations of readers. *Children's Literature* is an exhilarating quest across centuries, continents, and genres to discover how, and why, we first fall in love with the written word.

Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter Details

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stillme says

Read it for the history (Aesop - 19th century) if you enjoy historical background and stop there.

I got excited about from the introduction and first couple of chapters. As a historian and children's librarian, I found the background on older (and ancient) works quite interesting. But once he got to the modern (20th and 21st century) I disagreed with just about everything he wrote. It seems that he doesn't like or enjoy anything written after 1950. Besides, not every modern book has to be literature, or ironic or pushing an author's agenda. These are books for children - what about pure fun? Additionally, I feel that illustrations are a significant part of children's literature today and he gave it a cursory and weak overview tacked on in the final chapter.

Kath says

If you are interested in a philosophical discussion of paradigm shifts in children's literature from the Greco-Roman era to present day, this is the book for you. Lerer's work is scholarly and rich. The connections he makes between ideology and children's literature are fascinating. I particularly enjoyed the discussion of the influence of Darwin on the likes of Dr. Suess and Dadaists (theoretically, one could imagine that any creature could evolve). I don't think I would use this book in a course on Children's Lit at an undergrad level, but it is very interesting to consider the nature of children's literature before it was thus classified. The Epilogue resonates, as Lerer is quite clearly fond of words and books. Final analysis: Children's Literature is not for the faint of heart.

Rebecca Reid says

Reading Professor Lerer's overview of children's literature throughout history was an education. I think of children's literature as Charlotte's Web. Lerer takes us on a journey much farther back, to "Aesop's Fables" and The Iliad, which was foundational to children's learning in the Western tradition. The real question ends up being: where do children fit in history? At what point did literature written specifically for children enter the canon?

Surprisingly, it's much more recent than we may anticipate. Children's literature only became such once children were accepted as different from adults.

I began a project of writing a post for each chapter I read in this book; I was trying to read the key foundational books that children, through history, used as their formative texts. When I got to the chapter on Robinson Crusoe, Treasure Island, and so forth, I slowed down and I have not gone back and continued this project for the subsequent chapters.

My current thoughts about this book, having finished it, revolve somewhat around the first half, since that is

the part I read two or three times. It's a testimonial to me of classics. What amazed me is that children were able to read and learn from Robinson Crusoe in the 1800s. Why is it considered too advanced in language and concept for ten-year-old children today? In some respects, in reviewing the history of what children read, I realized that children are underestimated today. The fast-paced world of television and computer games has built generations of children that feel most comfortable with Captain Underpants and Diary of a Wimpy Kid. (Although I've read neither of these, they are the best-sellers and not Robinson Crusoe, so I feel safe making a stereotyped generalization.)

After reading about the history of children's reading, my overall impression is that we need to offer our kids more. True, it's okay to let them be kids: it took thousands of years to recognize the need for that stage of life. Professor Lerer's chapters about the more recent themes in children's literature are also important, because they illustrate the changing needs of children. After all, their role as children has only recently been created for them! It's okay to have a separate children's literature that they can best relate to. But at the same time, we need to believe in their abilities to understand, cope, and appreciate depth. It's okay to give them a classic book we may consider "adult." Chances are, two hundred years ago, it would have been a child's favorite.

My (ongoing) project page on my blog

Candy Wood says

Many histories of children's literature have been published, but this one is distinctive in several ways. For one, Seth Lerer is a medievalist and a philologist, a lover of words and of books. That means he has no problem, as others have, counting didactic texts of the ancient world, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance as literature, and he delights in books as objects, suggesting that such awareness is part of the definition of children's literature. It also means that 20th century titles get less attention, but the organization is not strictly chronological--he often jumps ahead to favorite modern texts in comparison to earlier ones.

The balance of British and American texts seems better than in many such histories, until America takes over in the 20th century. After 1945, British children's literature is all Harry Potter (who is unfortunately made American by the citation of "Sorcerer's" instead of *Philosopher's Stone*). For earlier time periods, though, emphasis on interconnections produces fascinating insights--for example, seeing Shel Silverstein as in the tradition of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Such insights, along with glimpses of Seth as child reader and as father of a teen, make this a rewarding book.

Catherine Boddie says

Full disclosure: I only really read the introduction and skimmed the rest of this book for a class. That said, Lerer takes a somewhat different approach to the study of children's literature than most standard children's lit. texts. His is not simply list after list of the best children's literature on offer but a critical analysis of the subject throughout history. He examines not only books written for children but anything read by children throughout history. Lerer also undertakes to examine many of the works critically, looking at themes, signs, and symbolism, and how the meaning of the works have changed overtime.

My first impression is that this is not the go to book for a quick recommendation in a particular genre (not

exactly desk reference material) but if one has the time or interest to explore children's literature on a deeper level and gain a greater understanding of its history and themes, this work might prove valuable.

Jason Wilson says

The basic thesis of this book is that the history of children's writing is a history of reading ; of the ways, didactic and otherwise, that books shape our childhoods .

This works to an extent and fascinating ground is covered : Use of Aesop in Ancient Greece , medieval teaching , Puritan literacy that fed secular equivalents , Victorian and Edwardian trends and finally some nods to modern developments .

His train of thought on how modern books continue to owe to the past and the way texts reflect us is interesting and valuable : but, too much of importance is missing. The author is right that there isn't room for everything but important trends are missed. The teenage detective genre from Nancy Drew (who gets a quick passing mention) to Enid Blyton May have had its day a bit (Alex Rider arguably owes more to Bond than Drew)but it's influence was huge ; many women in positions of power today cite Drew as an empowering influence . The tracing of the boarding school novel goes no further than the turn of the last century , but through the lines of Billy Bunter , Jennings and again Enid Blyton and Elinor Brent Dyer, the genre survived to flourish as the comprehensive school novel in the new age of social realism in children's writing (Bernard Ashley etc) before re emerging in the more fantastical context of Harry Potter . And on the subject of children's realism it was a huge turn that paved the way for tv series such as Grange Hill and Degrassi whose achievements in dealing with young peoples issues was immense , but the only mention here is given to Judy Blume and her then fresh treatment of adolescence and emergent sexuality .

The ever iconic Roald Dahl (to whom it has always seemed to me that Harry Potter, with its neglected childhood into which magic breaks has always owed this intellectual debt) is thankfully mentioned via Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Fantastic Mr Fix; odd however for a book so focussed on the philology and pedagogy of children's writing to omit Dahl's most bookish heroine , Matilda , feels odd.

There is also no mention of the childhood gothic; the gothic has always under the cloak of fantasy dealt with real emotional issues that real world fiction was slower to allow coverage of ; in point horror and romance Kay the beginning of the YA genre as it now is; again The sole mention goes to Blume .

Still , interesting all the same though again I could name authors without whom no treatment of myth in children's books Is complete !

Via audible

Cathy says

Boooooorrrriinnngggg. zzzzzzzzzz

Sarah Hannah says

So, this book probably would have been much better from the start if it hadn't called itself a history of children's literature. Really, it's a history of pedagogy and child development using literature as somewhat of a thread. At times he some interesting things to say, and I did appreciate the general information about eras and themes and all that, but it was so jumbly and missing so much stuff that it was ultimately a lot of nothing. Too bad. Onto another book.

Yousra Bushehri says

Such a satisfying read. It delivered in what it promised in the introductory chapter. It was an easy read written in plain english without giving me a headache with needing to use a dictionary for every other word.

It's VERY heard for me to find a history of literature book/text that isn't a little bit dry - to the point where I feel my eyeballs drying up - but this book by Lerer was wonderful. He included personal experiences that he went through as a child and what he went through with his child (son) and it was like talking to a friend (or a very awesome professor).

I read this book for a little background to the history and development of Children's Literature since I'm writing a research paper on Children's Lit. and this book was really helpful - the proof is in the number of PostIts I have sticking out of the pages of Lerer's book. and I could totally see myself rereading this book **FOR FUN!**

When I end up being a professor, this is a book I'm definitely going to get my students to read because it's seriously reader-friendly and it gives a lot of good examples, so even if you don't fully understand what Lerer is trying to say, his example clears it up for you.

A definite thumbs-up for me!

Kimberly Brooks says

Being a first grade teacher, I LOVE children's books so I was excited about reading this. I have to admit, though, that it took me a long time to finish it. The first several chapters were not that interesting to me...probably because they're about ancient literature I've never heard of. The last couple were quite good and made up for the beginning. Also, who writes a 30 page introduction? (It wasn't really 30 pages, but felt like it)

Angela Hill says

I really enjoyed and found helpful Dr. Lerer's analysis of ancient literature. While I found myself disagreeing with some of his assertions as he discussed more modern literature, I do have to admit this book made me rethink some of my own opinions about children's literature.

Kat Foster says

So grateful to have been able to read this book. It has been really helpful to my university degree, and I'm hoping to get so much more use out of it!

Nancy says

A very readable book that I used in my History of Children's Literature grad class. I enjoyed the historical aspect and how societal changes has affected how books are written and read today.

Waller says

I chose this book for my Social History of Children's Literature class based on the first few chapters, which did a great job of exposing some of the pre-17th century roots of children's reading. Even there, his rather idiosyncratic approach to children's books (they are all about reading and writing - duh), which reflects his background as a philologist.

As we got further into the book, though, it was clear that he had/has a profound ignorance of large swaths of children's literature and of children's literature criticism - another guy coming in from outside to show the world how important kids' books are without realizing that there are those of us who spend our whole careers doing that.

By the time we get to the 20th century, the superficiality of his analysis of some of the texts is astounding, and his discomfort with children's books shows in the proportion of the text that is devoted to discussing writing for adults rather than for children.

Read the early chapters and skip the rest.

Molly Westerman says

I recently assigned this book as the main secondary/historical text in an undergraduate children's literature course. It's illuminating and useful, particularly because of its huge historical (and to a more limited extent geographical) scope, and certainly worth reading if you want to learn about children's literature in a broader context, as changing over time (just like childhood has done). The book raises excellent questions and attends to an impressive range of ideas and texts.

It has its problems, though. Most upsetting to me are Lerer's often-weak close readings and textual analysis, which model speculation and wishful thinking as much as actual analysis (sacrificing the particularities of a text to the needs of his argument) and his habit of using "child" to mean, roughly, "white well-to-do boy."

