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ABSTRACT

For at least three reasons, university English faculties should reassess their attitudes toward children's literature, a field of vital importance in children's education. First, specialists in children's literature are sorely needed in English departments, where courses on the subject properly belong (rather than in colleges of education). Second, it is a new field of scholarly research and analysis, and there is thus a great need for careful assessment of the cultural, artistic, historic, psychological, and philosophical significance of children's literature. Third, with the problems currently facing college and university English departments, self-interest dictates the need for expanding children's literature programs, including active, innovative graduate courses leading to master's and doctor's degrees in the field. (JM)

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The Onus of Teaching Children's Literature: the Need for Some Reappraisals

Carol Gay

Whenever I find myself talking about Children's Literature--especially whenever it's necessary for me to assert my claim to any degree of stature--I always hear myself saying that though I've been teaching Children's Literature for about seven years, my real field is Colonial and Nineteenth Century American Literature. This sort of prefatory comment is frequent for those of us in the field of English who are also interested in Children's Literature, and our need to make such a statement says a lot about how we view ourselves and how our colleagues view us. The field of Children's Literature occupies the same position--outside the pale of respectable scholarly endeavour--that American Literature once occupied in English departments. A little later it was the linguistic scientist and the American Studies specialist who met with quiet, knowing smiles. And the folklorist has only recently been accepted. Hopefully, those of us in Children's Literature will soon be able to make the same strong intellectual and critical contributions that these fields have made and prove to our colleagues our right to be accepted as a legitimate field of scholarly concern. But Children's Literature is handicapped by its close connection with three groups that English departments have traditionally disassociated themselves with, and indeed viewed with suspicion: schools of library

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science, schools of education--and children.

As Dr. Francelia Butler, scholar, author, and children's literature specialist at the University of Connecticut, noted in a recent New York Times article:

> To many humanists (including department chairman) in languages, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, or history, the most embarrassing literature to study is not autoeroticism or cunnilingus. On such works scholars pride themselves on their broadmindedness. What truly embarrasses them is literature for their own children--"kiddy lit," they call it.
>
> If a state legislature forces a chairman of an English department to add children's literature to the curriculum, he generally looks about for someone whom he regards as too incompetent to teach any other course. And male chauvinism being what it is, this someone is most often a middle-aged woman ("fair, fat, fifty, female, finished" is the phrase in academia).[1]

In this time of empty classrooms, retrenchment, and loss of interest in the discipline of English, and faced with accusations of being irrelevant, indifferent, and passe, perhaps we ought to take another look at our attitude toward children's literature, and our responsibility as specialists in literature toward it.

Professor Butler, in the article I just cited, mentions several reasons for the humanists' continued disdain toward children's literature, one of which is the objection that "Children's literature is so simple and obvious that any fool can understand it. It doesn't need study." After mentioning the "simplicity" of the Psalms of David, the parables of Jesus, and Blake's Songs of Innocence, Professor Butler conjectures that the "reason behind the objection to the simplicity of children's literature' might possibly be that "most scholars don't know how to go about teaching unless they can lean on intellectual crutches. For literature these crutches abound in the numerous books of exegesis and volumes of criticism of criticism. There are also complicated passages in the works being studied which afford delightful opportunities to display verbal and intellectual prowess--or at the least, excellent memories. A scholar likes to talk. Confronted by a children's book, he can't think of anything to say. The simplicity shocks, leaves him speechless." She mentions also the frequently heard objections that it is "not in the established curriculum" and that "no standards of criticism exist comparable to those for adult literature," and suggests that scholars "get off their *ars poetica* long enough" to realize"that children's literature has an ancient tradition in the culture if not in the curriculum, and that scholars have an obligation to study it."

In this paper I would like to put forward three reasons why we as English faculties need to take a new look at children's literature. First, we are badly needed. Second, it is a new and fallow field of scholarly research and analysis. Third, base self-interest dictates our becoming involved. It is the first reason that I would like to dwell on at most length--that is, that we are sorely needed.

Although no one has come up with a completely satisfactory answer to how we learn to read and write, more and more studies are confirming what those of us who know how to read and write and who like to read and write have known all along: when a person enjoys reading, he generally reads; the more he reads, the better he reads; the better he reads, the better he writes--and all of this has some mysterious but close link with the whole thinking process. There are a few isolated cases where a person can discover the world of books quite late--Melville, for instance; but in general the earlier he is exposed to books, the greater the effect. A study in England of pre-school children indicates that children who were read to developed more mature language patterns than children who were not read to, that introducing a child to forty nursery rhymes can introduce him to four hundred new words.[2] Studies of ghetto children in New York have indicated that those who have been read to regularly in kindergarten have an easier time adapting to standard language patterns. Other studies have shown that children who come from homes where one or both parents teach, read more and read with more comprehension in school than other children, and that such homes have a higer percentage of people reading than homes where neither parent teaches. Obviously. The few tenuous studies available indicate that thirty-five percent of our teachers are reading a book other than a text on any given day. Thirty-one percent of those people who have college educations are reading a book on any given day; for the general public the figure is twenty-one percent. This would seem to indicate that over three-fourths of our children are being taught to read by teachers who aren't reading a book.[3] In general, it does not seem to be too rash to conclude that a teacher who isn't interested enough in reading to read a book probably isn't going to be able to generate much enthusiasm for reading in his students. And those students who don't like to read generally don't read and can't write and grow up to be teachers who don't read and -- where does the cycle end? Obviously cycles don't end; they just go on and on, and we really ought not to be too surprised that students are not flocking to our Introduction to Literature classes where books are read and discussued "for the purpose of increased delight and understanding," or English Survey classes from Beowulf to Milton. Because if we don't capture them in kindergarten, we're not going to have them as college sophomores. Of course, there will always be some who read in spite of all those teachers who don't read, but there can be more, and there certainly should be, if we can once break the cycle.

Strong college programs in children's literature taught by competent, respected literary specialists can help break the cycle. Children's literature courses can bring teachers and books together (sometimes for the first time--that is one of the most rewarding things about teaching a children's literature class); the next step, of course, is bringing together the children and the books. An elementary school teacher who is enthraled by Maurice Sendak is going to have a good chance of communicating this fascination to his pupils; a junior high school teacher who has just finished reading Irene Hunt's Up a Road Slowly is going to have a good chance of tempting his students to read it; a secondary teacher who has read Robb White's Death Watch breathlessly has a good chance of sharing it with his students. I know: "breathlessly "fascination," "enthralled"--how excessive, how unsophisticated! But as C. S. Lewis says (in "On Three Ways of Writing for Children"), "Those of us who are blamed when old for reading childish books were blamed when children for reading books too old for us," which points up an obviously basic tenet in the field of literature (once more in the words of C. S. Lewis): "I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children's story which enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story." But here I am on the defensive again about reading and enjoying and teaching children's books. When there is no longer a need for defensiveness, maybe we will have a chance at knocking down that statistic that 69 % of our college graduates do not read. But not until.

And certainly not until we in the field of English accept our responsibility of staffing children's literature courses. As usual, the statistics are discouraging.

The most recent survey taken by the NCTE Committee on Teaching Children's Literature in Colleges and Universities--whose purpose was "To study and report on the teaching of children's literature in colleges and universities and to make recommendations concerning possible actions by the Council to strengthen the teaching of children's literature"--indicated that Children's Literature is usually offered in departments of elementary education.[4] Out of 503 respondents to the survey, 330 teachers offered the basic course in the department of elementary educatio 169 offered the course in the department of English; and 116 offered the course in the department of library science. Some overlapping of answers seemed to indicate that in some cases the course was a dual offering by two departments, but there was no way of determining in how many cases this was ture. As for advanced courses, including graduate courses, figures were a little different--English dropped to third place: out of 70 respondents, 40 offered the course in the department of elementary education, 26 in library science, and 23 in English.

The figures concerned with the training of the professors of children's literature are also revealing: out of 503 respondents teaching the basic courses, only 226 majored in English in their baccalaureate programs. This is less than half. Of those teaching the advanced course, 31 out of 70 were not English majors in their baccalaureate programs. This too is less than half. More than half of those teaching children's literature courses have not had a major background in the study of literature. If we turn to still other figures in an attempt to judge the qualifications of those teaching children's literature, we find that out of 503 respondents teaching the basic course, 387 did not have earned doctorates. Of 70 of those replying who taught advanced courses, including graduate courses, only 36 had earned doctorates. There was no indication of how many of these were Ph. D's with a speciality in literature, but since the predominance of undergraduate majors was in elementary education, one is free to make some assumptions. Obviously, even the Ph. D. is no talisman of competence, but it is certainly one way that is frequently used to measure the prestige of a field--and these figures are depressing any way you look at them. They indicate that most teachers are being taught about children's literature by people whose own training in literature is minimal and whose own reading background is probably somewhat limited. And they certainly indicate that English departments are not doing their share.

Of course, it can be objected that one doesn't need to be a trained literary specialist to talk about Peter Rabbit. An answer to that objection too obvious to be dwelt on here is that Peter Rabbit is not the only book that appears in children's literature curricula; that the range of authors creating for children is extensive and sophisticated; and that with the increased emphasis on so-called adolescent literature, the field is even further enlarged and deepened. But there is a more basic answer to the problem of who should be helping staff children's literature courses and developing new programs. Literary judgment and taste are formed by experience. In words that cannot be improved upon, the business of the scholar and the critic and the teacher is "simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas." An English specialist is a professional reader, trained in analysis and close reading; his skills are needed in a field that has been dominated by publishers and librarians, in a field where sound critical analysis of new literature is lacking and where reviews are strong on summary and on adjectives and weak on placing the work in juxtaposition with its cultural and literary tradition and measuring its worth. In other words, children's books should be discussed as books. If one refers to the NCTE survey, it might seem that this is precisely what is going on--that books are approached from a literary point of view. For instance, a table which attempts to determine content and goals would seem to indicate that most teachers give the highest priority in class time to discussing the "criteria of good literature." But if we look more closely at the charts and if we remember that most of the courses are taught by people whose training is non-literary, there is a good possibility that many (most?) are not even aware of what is meant by the term "criteria of good literature." Tables which attempt to detail what is required reading in the courses are somewhat confusing, as charts tend to be--and I'm not sure that they give us much tangible information. They indicate, for instance, that 65% of the teachers required their students to read 40 or more books in the course of a term. 20 % of the teachers indicated that they expected their students to read more than 80 books a term. At the same time, 42% used an anthology as a required text, which would seem to indicate that in many cases teachers are making assignments in an anthology in addition to requiring students to read 40 or more books a term. Obviously, serious students cannot seriously read 80 books a term, or even 40 books a term. Let alone an anthology. Obviously, there is some question about the meaning of the word "book" here and some question about the meaning of the word "read." At Youngstown State University, when the English department took over the children's literature course, the required reading list was slashed more than half--from 50 to 20. The casual obvserve might conclude that our standards dropped. What we did, of course, was to eliminate picture books from the required reading list and to permit only books over a certain reading level--which we expected to be read and analyzed.

A recent study which corrobates the view that we have not been successful in approaching children's literature from a literary point of view was reported in Elementary English. When a questionnaire citing various literary criteria agreed upon by recognized specialists in children's literature was sent to the district directors of California's Head Start Programs to see whether these criteria were similar to those they used in choosing books for the children in their programs, it was discovered that though the "academicians strongly advocated criteria that stressed literary qualities of books. . .only 64 per cent of the educators felt that children's literature must fulfill the standards of excellence in writing." The author concluded, "The results of this study indicate the need for greater cooperation between educators and experts in the field of children's literature."[5] And when we realize that the "experts in children's literature" are not usually experts in the field of literature, the difficulties increase.

Recently at a university well known for its attempts to raise the standards in the field of children's literature but where its graduate program in children's literature is offered by the School of Education, its graduate professor told me that one of the "projects" in his class was to have his graduate students find out all they could about a particular author, then break up into discussion groups, and on set days bring in shopping bags full of the works of these authors and pass them around and talk about them. He said their enthusiasm was heartwarming. When I asked him how he managed to have his students read shopping bags full of books in addition to their other assignments, and how discussions were possible between students who had read different books, he looked surprised. "They don't read them" he said. "They just get acquainted with them, and pass them around." The students, he said, prefer this approach rather than the approach used by the English Department on the undergraduate level because it is so much more "practical."

Please do not mistake me. While I am deploring the approach taken in far too many classes, I am not denigrating the contributions that librarians and educationists have made to the field of children's literature. Anyone with more than a cursory knowledge of the field can only greet with respect the critical and scholarly and bibliographical works of such librarians as Francis Clarke Sayers and Aidan Chambers and Lillian Smith, and such educationists as May Hill Arbuthnot and Dewey Chambers. And further, there are extra-literary aspects to the teaching of children's literature. My point is that it is time we joined these fields and recognize that we too have something to offer.

In a paper given at the 1972 Modern Language Association on Children's Literature, Francis J. Molson commented on the dilemma frequently facing the literary specialist who undertakes a children's literature course:

> wherever the humanist has responsibility for the introductory course in children's literature, he must not attempt to be all things to his students, regardless of the pressures put upon him. Rather, he should do that for which he is trained or wants to do: for instance, to discuss the relation between children's books and society's desire to control its children; or to discuss narrative strategies in Victorian children's books. Why must he be expected to provide units on the making of picture books, bibliotherapy, reading and interest levels, selecting materials for the library, or classroom methods of presenting children's books? Is it really feasible to most of us to acquire in one working lifetime the competency of the reading specialist, and the art and graphic expert? If we try, we present their specialty in our classes with a superficial acquaintance that barely distinguishes us from our students. Some of us are so busy being Jacks in everybody else's trade that we are unable to be the Master we are supposed to be in our own.[6]

And this I fear is what happens at the present time in the classrooms of even the most conscienctious instructors. Professor Molson suggests innovative interdisciplinary courses in introductory children's literature classes, and further, the development of programs to train specialists in the field that will reflect "the rigor and openness of the best liberal arts graduate instruction" and yet will not forget "that the phrase 'children's literature' is made up of two terms, 'children' and 'literature.'" In other words, English departments must recognize their responsibility toward staffing children's literature courses, and further, undertake to provide programs to train specialists in children's literature--to try to lower a few more rather dismal statistics in the NCTE survey: that is, that over half of the respondents had had no undergraduate work in children's literature and that 40% had not had even one course in children's literature on the graduate level. No wonder the specialists in children's literature are so seldom special.

Thus, there is little doubt that we are sorely needed, but there are other reasons why English faculties need to take a new look at children's literature, closely allied to my above statements; one is the scholarly fascination inherent in the field.

Although the library-oriented Hornbook has been published since 1923 and although the American Library Association and the NCTE have for many years taken an active interest in the field of children's literature, the Modern Language Association gave its first notice to the field only four years ago when a Seminar in Children's Literature appeared on the national agenda (under Miscellaneous). The Midwest Modern Language Associationhas only recently directed its attention to children's literature and this merely reflects the attitudes of other regional scholarly organizations. It was only two years ago that an organization primarily oriented toward the humanites, the Children's Literature Association, was formed and took over a periodical which had developed out of the 1971 MLA Seminar on Children's Literature. The Children's Literature Association, which held its first conference in 1974 at Storrs, Connecticut, is the first organization to attempt to "give professional status to the graduate and undergraduate teaching of children's literature" and its publication, Children's Literature, is the first serious scholarly journal in the field. The articles appearing in its first three volumes indicate the promise the field holds. Dr. Robert Bator writes on "Out of the Ordinary Road: Locke and English Juvenile Fiction in the Eighteenth Century." Dr. Lee Jacobus, seventeenth century specialist, discusses "Milton's Comus as Children's Literature." Dr. Bennett Brockman, medievalist, gives a detailed analysis of Chaucer's Monk's Tale in his "Medieval Songs of Innocence and Experience: the Adult Writer and Literature for Children." Professor Brockman launches his discussion by citing a verse from a 1372 commonplace book:

"Sing nou, modern," seide that child,
"Wat me sal be-falle
Here after wan i cum to old--
So do modres alle"

and introduces his analysis of the cannibalistic and macabre tale by commenting:

> The medieval no less than the modern age assumes the child's cence--his lack of experience in the adult world--and attempts

> to prepare him for entering that world by explaining its modes of operation and the rationale or the myths which underlie or account for them. The adult effort, and the felt need which prompts it, is vividly indicated by one modern child's book which explains that death--perhaps the fact most difficult for the child to come to terms with--is simply a part of the natural scheme of things: "After burial a body, which is composed of nearly three-quarters water, soon changes. The soft tissues break down and disappear first. Within a year only bones are left." Put into its place in the clinical context of a twentieth-century scientific outlook, death is supposed to become comprehensible and hence less terrifying. The The medieval poem quoted above reflects the same basic assumption, which all ages have perhaps held: the adult must initiate the child into an understanding of the world they both must inhabit.

In an article entitled "Prickles under the Frock" Seth Sicroff indicates the possibility of serious literary analysis as he sets out his thesis:

> Beatrix Potter's prose style bears a resemblande to Mrs. Tiggy-winkle's plain print frock; underneath the deceptively simple dress there are prickles. The apparently simple, guileless point of view of the narrator is betrayed by an understated humor which depends on the complications of word games and the interplay between details of text and illustration. The premise of anthropomorphism is not accepted and ignored, but continually recalled to mind by sly references and incongruities. To see the importance of the deliberately bland and aphoristic sentence structure, one need only

compare the taut understatement of Potter's "your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor" with the wordy French translation: "Un accident affreux. . . ." A recent article by Ravenna Helson discusses "The Psychological Origins of Fantasy for Children in Mid-Victorian England." I am deliberately risking boring the reader with these long citations because so few English specialists found their own way to a publication on children's literature. And this is precisely the point. (Perhaps my loyalty to children's literature ought to prompt me to try to protect its purity by keeping it out of the obtuse grasp of the literary specialist instead of encouraging its further entwinement.) At any rate the field is ripe for serious scholarly endeavor. There is a great need for careful assessment of the cultural, artistic, historic, psychological, and philosophical significance of kiddy lit.

The third reason I urge you to reappraise your views toward children's literature is self-interest. Not too much needs to be said here. We all know what a spot we're all in. Low enrollment, small classes, retrenchment, English programs that keep drawing in upon themselves. Obviously, there are no easy resolutions for any of these problems. I would just like to suggest that in the field of children's literature there is room for and interest in expansion. As more and more people acknowledge the need for the specialist in children's literature, there will be more demands for active, innovative graduate programs leading to M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s in children's literature. English departments should take the lead in developing them. On the undergraduate level, penetrating courses dealing with the history of children's literature can not only add to the English major's depth and background, they can draw non-majors who know that though they will not become teachers they may become parents. Children's literature is a drawing card, because it is a delightful course. It need not be a basket-weaving course--and it won't be if Englis departments recognize their responsibility in setting up standards.

Thus, there is a need for us to reassess our attitudes toward the field of Children's Literature. We should think seriously of making children's literature one of our regular offerings in the English curriculum and of offering it for full credit toward a major. If your department already has a children's literature course, think about expanding it through special topics courses, or through specific specialized area approaches--for example, children's literature in the Victorian era, or Children's Drama. Or consider incorporating material from this field into your own area of specialty, both in your classes and in your research and writing. We must start taking an interest in the literature of children so that children will start taking an interest in literature--and in us. Dr. Butler points out, "If literature and life are indeed closely related, as those in Departments of Literature maintain, then one cannot scorn the literature of children and youth without scorning those for whom the literature is designed. This scorn, neglect, oversight (blind spot) may be one key to our present problem with youth. It points to the psychological attitude upon the part of the adult (even the 'thinking' adult) which aggravates the problem."[7] At any rate, not until we approach the literature of children with respect, recognizing it not as "kiddie lit" but like C.S. Lewis, as "the best art form for something [the artist] has to say" --not until then will the onus be removed from teaching children's literature.

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Footnotes

[1] Book Review, *The New York Times*, Sunday, May 6, 1973.

[2] A. F. Watts, *The Language and Mental Development of Children* (London, 1964), cited by Dora V. Smith, "Developmental Language Patterns of Children," in *Effective Language Arts Practices in the Ele-School: Selected REadings*, ed. Harold Newman (New York, 1972), p. 13.

[3] Alvina Trent Burrow, "The Pursuit of Exce-lence in the Language Arts," in Newman, pp. 2-3.

[4] *Teaching Children's Literature in Colleges and Universities*, ed. Elliott D. Landau (Champaign, 1968).

[5] Laurel Ladevich, "Determining Literary Quality in Children's Literature," *Elementary English* (October, 1974), p. 983.

[6] "The Humanist Teaches Children's Literature: Some Considerations," reprinted in *Children's Literature*, II (1973), 75.

[7] Preface, *Children's Literature*, I (1971), 8.