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Children's Literature

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Children's literature is any literature that is enjoyed by children. More specifically, children's literature comprises those books written and published for young people who are not yet interested in adult literature or who may not possess the reading skills or developmental understandings necessary for its perusal. In addition to books, children's literature also includes magazines intended for pre-adult audiences.

The age range for children's literature is from infancy through the stage of early adolescence, which roughly coincides with the chronological ages of twelve through fourteen. Between that literature most appropriate for children and that most appropriate for adults lies young adult literature. Usually young adult literature is more mature in content and more complex in literary structure than children's literature.

Most of the literary genres of adult literature appear in children's literature as well. Fiction in its various forms—contemporary realism, fantasy and historical fiction, poetry, folk tales, legends, myths, and epics—all have their counterparts in children's literature. Nonfiction for children includes books about the arts and humanities; the social, physical, biological, and earth sciences; and biography and autobiography. In addition, children's books may take the form of picture books in which visual and verbal texts form an interconnected whole. Picture books for children include storybooks, alphabet books, counting books, wordless books, and concept books.

History

Literature written specifically for an audience of children began to be published on a wide scale in the seventeenth century. Most of the early books for children were didactic rather than artistic, meant to teach letter sounds and words or to improve the child's moral and spiritual life. In the mid-1700s, however, British publisher John Newbery (1713–1767), influenced by [John Locke](#)'s ideas that children should enjoy reading, began publishing books for children's amusement. Since that time there has been a gradual transition from the deliberate use of purely didactic literature to inculcate moral, spiritual, and ethical values in children to the provision of literature to entertain and inform. This does not imply that suitable literature for children is either immoral or amoral. On the contrary, suitable literature for today's children is influenced by the cultural and ethical values of its authors. These values are frequently revealed as the literary work unfolds, but they are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Authors assume a degree of intelligence on the part of their audience that was not assumed in the past. In this respect, children's literature has changed dramatically since its earliest days.

Another dramatic development in children's literature in the twentieth century has been the picture book. Presenting an idea or story in which pictures and words work together to create an aesthetic whole, the picture book traces its origin to the nineteenth century, when such outstanding artists as Randolph Caldecott, Kate Greenaway, and Walter Crane were at work. In the 1930s and 1940s such great illustrators as Wanda Gag, Marguerite de Angeli, James Daugherty, Robert Lawson, Dorothy Lathrop, Ludwig Bemelmans, Maud and Miska Petersham, and Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire began their work. Many of these and other equally illustrious artists helped to bring picture books to their present position of prominence. Since 1945 many highly talented illustrators have entered this field.

With the advent of computer-based reproduction techniques in the latter part of the twentieth century, the once tedious and expensive process of full color reproduction was revolutionized, and now almost any original media can be successfully translated into picture book form. Although many artists continue to work with traditional media such as printmaking, pen and ink, photography, and paint, they have been joined by artists who work with paper sculpture, mixed media constructions, and computer graphics.

The changes in literature for older children have been equally important. Among the early and lasting contributions to literature for children were works by Jack London, [Mark Twain](#), Rudyard Kipling, Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Hans Christian Andersen. These writers, however, considered adults their major audience; therefore, they directed only some of their literary efforts toward young readers. Today, large numbers of highly talented authors have turned to younger readers for an audience and direct most, if not all, of their writings to them.

Another major change in publishing for children has been the rise in multicultural children's literature. Prior to the mid-twentieth century the world depicted in children's books was largely a white world. If characters from a nonwhite culture appeared in children's books they were almost always badly stereotyped. The civil rights movement alerted publishers and the reading public to the need for books that depicted the America of all children, not just a white majority. Although the percentage of children's books by and about people of color does not equate with their actual population numbers, authors of color such as Virginia Hamilton, Mildred Taylor, Alma Flor Ada, Walter Dean Myers, Gary Soto, and Laurence Yep, and illustrators such as Allen Say, Ed Young, John Steptoe, Jerry Pinkney, and Brian Pinkney have made major contributions to a more multiculturally balanced world of children's books.

Not only are there larger numbers of talented writers and artists from many cultures at work for children, but the range of subject matter discussed in children's fiction has also been extended remarkably. Topics that were considered taboo only a short time ago are being presented in good taste. Young readers from ten to fourteen can read well-written fiction that deals with death, child abuse, economic deprivation, alternative life styles, illegitimate pregnancy, juvenile gang warfare, and rejected children. By the early twenty-first century it had become more nearly true than ever before that children may explore life through literature.

Literature in the Lives of Children

Literature serves children in four major ways: it helps them to better understand themselves, others, their world, and the aesthetic values of written language. When children read fiction, narrative poetry, or biography, they often assume the role of one of the characters. Through that character's thoughts, words, and actions the child develops insight into his or her own character and values. Frequently, because of experiences with literature, the child's modes of behavior and value structures are changed, modified, or extended.

When children assume the role of a book's character as they read, they interact vicariously with the other characters portrayed in that particular selection. In the process they learn something about the nature of behavior and the consequences of personal interaction. In one sense they become aware of the similarities and differences among people.

Because literature is not subject to temporal or spatial limitations, books can figuratively transport readers across time and space. Other places in times past, present, or future invite children's exploration. Because of that exploration, children come to better understand the world in which they live and their own relationship to it.

Written language in its literary uses is an instrument of artistic expression. Through prose and poetry children explore the versatility of the written word and learn to master its depth of meaning. Through literature, too, children can move beyond the outer edges of reality and place themselves in worlds of make-believe, unfettered by the constraints of everyday life.

Environment

The three principal settings in which children's literature functions are the home, the public library, and the school. In each of these settings, the functions of literature are somewhat different, but each function supports the others and interacts with them.

Home. Irrefutable evidence indicates that those children who have had an early and continuing chance to interact with good literature are more apt to succeed in school than those who have not. Parents who begin to read aloud to their children, often from birth, are communicating the importance of literature by providing an enjoyable experience. The young child makes a lasting connection between books, which provide pleasure, and the undisputed attention from the parent who takes time to do the reading. During the preschool years, books contribute to children's language structures and to their vocabulary. Children acquire a sense of language pattern and rhythm from the literary usage of language that is not found in everyday conversational speech. Then, too, children discover that print has meaning, and as they acquire the ability to read print as well as understand pictures, children find further pleasure in books. In finding that reading has its own intrinsic reward, children acquire the most important motivation for learning to master reading skills.

Public library. Public libraries have taken on an increasingly important role in serving children. Children's rooms, which were once the domain of a few select children, are inviting places for all children, whether or not they are inveterate readers. Libraries organize story hours, present films, and provide computers and quiet places to do homework as well as present special book-related events and sponsor book clubs and summer reading programs. Children's librarians guide the reading interests of children and act as consultants to parents. Full exploitation of the public library in the broader education of children has not yet been achieved, but growing acceptance by the public of the library as a community necessity rather than a luxury will help it to continue to play an increasingly important role in the lives of children.

School. Literature did not begin to make broad inroads into the reading curriculum until the 1950s. Before that time many schools had no library, and a good number of these schools did not even feel the need for one. Many schools relied almost exclusively on textbooks for instruction. By the end of the twentieth century, however, nearly every curriculum authority had come to recognize the importance of trade books (books other than textbooks) in the in-school education of children. In the early twenty-first century most schools have central libraries staffed by trained librarians and some schools provide financial support for classroom libraries as well. When this is not the case, teachers, recognizing the value of good literature, often reach into their own pockets to provide trade books for their classrooms. A 1998 survey of school library media programs by the Center of Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education found a mean of twenty-eight volumes per elementary school child in both public and private schools.

Function in the school curriculum. Literature plays an increasingly large role in the formal education of children in three related but rather discrete areas: the instructional reading program, the subject matter areas, and the literature program.

Most instructional reading programs recognize the importance of literature. Basal reading textbook programs generally recommend that trade books be used from the beginning of formal reading instruction in order to motivate readers through the long, and sometimes frustrating, efforts that learning to read usually demands. Through trade books the reader finds those efforts are rewarded by the pleasure gained from reading. In many schools the teaching of reading has been centered on trade books rather than textbooks. But in literature-based programs, teachers plan instruction around experiences with "real" books, experiences that include helping students make their own reading choices and giving children time to share responses to reading with their peer group. Schools with such literature-based programs recognize the importance of creating a classroom community of readers that will not only help children learn how to read but will also encourage them to become lifelong readers.

Subject matter areas, such as social studies and the sciences, have depended to a large extent upon textbooks to provide common learning for entire classes. However, there are limitations inherent in the nature of textbooks that require supplementation by trade books. Because textbooks survey broad areas of knowledge, space limitations prevent in-depth explorations of particular topics. Recent discoveries and events cannot always be included because textbook series require long periods of preparation. Content area textbooks are often subject to review by state committees that limit potentially controversial material. Trade books are widely used to offset these limitations. Nonfiction books provide opportunities for in-depth consideration of particular topics. Furthermore, the comparatively short time needed for the preparation and publication of trade books makes recent discoveries and occurrences available to the reader.

Elementary school literature programs vary widely. As state and national standards and testing drive curriculum some schools reflect the attitude that literature is a luxury, if not an undesirable frill.

In such schools little, if any, in-school time is devoted either to reading for pleasure or to the formal study of literature. Most schools, however, recognize children's need for some pleasurable experiences with literature that enable them to return to books to think more deeply about the characters, themes, and other literary elements. In such schools the study of literature is grounded in reader response theory that grew out of Louise Rosenblatt's contention in *Literature as Exploration* that "the literary work exists in a live circuit set up between reader and text" (p. 25). Thus the reader is seen as a coconstructor of meaning with the author. Any plan for the direct study of literary form, structure, and content as a means of heightening the pleasure of reading includes, at a minimum, teachers reading aloud from works of literature, and the formation of book circles where small groups of students regularly meet together to discuss books. In addition teachers should plan time for children to respond to books through writing, creative dramatics, and other art forms.

Awards

There are a number of awards made to authors and illustrators of children's books, and these awards frequently aid readers in the selection of books. The most prestigious American awards are the Newbery Medal and the Caldecott Medal. The Newbery Medal is presented each year to the author of the "most distinguished contribution to American literature for children" published in the previous year. To be eligible for the award, the author must be a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident of the [United States](#). The winner is chosen by a committee of the Association of Library Services to Children (ALSC) of the American Library Association (ALA). The Caldecott Medal is given each year to "the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children." The winner is selected by the same committee that chooses the Newbery winner. In addition to the Newbery and Caldecott medals, other prominent awards given under the auspices of the ALSC include the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, which is given to an author or illustrator who has "made a substantial contribution to literature for children" over a period of years; the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award, which honors the author whose work of nonfiction has made a significant contribution to the field of children's literature in a given year; and the Batchelder Award, given to the publisher of the most outstanding book of the year that is a translation, published in the United States, of a book that was first published in another country. Other notable American book awards include the Coretta Scott King Awards given by the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association to an African-American author and an African-American illustrator for outstanding inspirational and educational contributions to literature for children, and the Pura Belpré Award, which is sponsored by ALSC and REFORMA (the National Association to Promote Library Service to the Spanish Speaking). This award is presented annually to a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding book for children. The Hans Christian Andersen prize, the first international children's book award, was established in 1956 by the International Board on Books for Young People. Given every two years, the award was expanded in 1966 to honor an illustrator as well as an author. A committee composed of members from different countries judges the selections recommended by the board or library associations in each country.

The following list of outstanding children's books was selected from award winners of the twentieth century and is meant to mark important milestones in children's literature.

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- Bontemps, Arna. 1948. *Story of the Negro*. New York: Knopf.
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- Brown, Marcia. 1947. *Stone Soup*. New York: Scribner's.
- Brown, Marcia. 1961. *Once a Mouse*. New York: Scribner's.
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- Gates, Doris. 1940. *Blue Willow*. New York: Viking.
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- George, Jean. 1972. *Julie of the Wolves*. New York: Harper and Row.
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- Henry, Marguerite. 1948. *King of the Wind*. Illustrated by Wesley Dennis. New York: Rand McNally.
- Hesse, Karen. 1997. *Out of the Dust*. New York: Scholastic.
- Hodges, Margaret. 1984. *Saint George and the Dragon*. Illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman. Boston: Little, Brown.

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- Konigsburg, E. L. 1967. *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. New York: Atheneum.
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- Lawson, Robert. 1944. *Rabbit Hill*. New York: Viking.
- L'Engle, Madeleine. 1962. *A Wrinkle in Time*. New York: Farrar, Straus.
- Lenski, Lois. 1945. *Strawberry Girl*. New York: Lippincott.
- Lester, Julius. 1968. *To Be a Slave*. New York: Dial.
- Lionni, Leo. 1963. *Swimmy*. New York: Pantheon.
- Lobel, Arnold. 1972. *Frog and Toad Together*. New York: Harper and Row.
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- Lowry, Lois. 1989. *Number the Stars*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
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See also: [English Education](#), [subentry on Teaching of](#); [Language Arts](#), [Teaching of](#); [Reading](#).

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