Preface

Katherine Paterson famously said, “I love revision. Where else can spilled milk be turned into ice cream?” It is with this spirit that I have entered into this eighth edition. Certainly, being asked to do a revision is both an honor and an opportunity—and I have tried to make the most of that opportunity. In doing so, I hope to have preserved the features that faithful users have liked, and to have made changes that will improve the text for everyone.

As frequently happens, this revision turned out to be more dramatic than I had originally envisioned. Large portions have been rewritten in the interest of clarity and economy. More examples have been included, which has often permitted a streamlining of the text. I have always believed one of the virtues of this book is its adaptability to a wide variety of course designs. The chapters have been reorganized—always a dangerous thing to do for loyal users. But it seems to me that moving the chapter on literary elements to the place just before the chapters on fantasy, realism and nonfiction makes a great deal of sense. And I have found that in my own classes, I used the elements chapter in conjunction with the genre chapters. Naturally, every instructor has to adapt the text to his or her own needs and goals.

New to This Edition

- All chapters have been rewritten and some have been reorganized to accommodate new research and material.
- All resource lists have been updated resources.
- The booklists following Chapters 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, and 12 now provide a brief annotation for each entry, which should make the lists more useful to prospective teachers and to general readers.
- A brief discussion of world literature around the world has been restored to Chapter 1, acknowledging the increasingly international flavor of children's literature.
- Chapter 3 (The Literature Experience) now includes a brief discussion of the Common Core Curriculum and a discussion of the use of technology in the classroom.
- A list of 25 Things to Do with Poetry has been included in Chapter 7 (Poetry).
- Chapter 8 (Folk Narratives) now includes a section on using folktales in the classroom.
- Chapter 9 (The Elements of Story) now includes a brief discussion of critical approaches to literature as applied to children's literature.
Preface

- Chapter 12 (Nonfiction) now includes guidelines for evaluating nonfiction texts.
- The Orbis Pictus Award has been added to the Book Awards Appendix

_Literature for Children: A Short Introduction_ was originally written as a supplement to primary texts used in the classroom. My own students spend most of their time reading the primary material—the picture books, the poetry, the folktales, the fantasies, the realistic fiction, the nonfiction. This book is but a guide—and I hope a friendly one. Finally, I offer no apology for my approach, which is decidedly literary, reflecting my own background as a teacher of English literature. My hope is that all who use this book come away with more than just ideas about how to make reading fun in the classroom (however important that is). Children's literature provides an excellent opportunity for us to develop an appreciation for the art of literature and an understanding of how literature reflects our world and ourselves.

I would like to thank the reviewers of this book for their comments: Gail Ditchman, Moraine Valley Community College; Brenda Dales, Miami University; Lee Edward Allen, University of Memphis; Christine Warren, Southeast Missouri State University; Olga H. Fischer, University of Texas at Tyler.

As always, I close with a quotation from _Ecclesiasticus_, a question that goes to the heart of education:

*If thou hast gathered nothing in thy youth, how canst thou find anything in thine age?*
Introduction

It is popular to date the history of children's books from the mid-eighteenth century, when the English publisher John Newbery began selling books for children in his shop near St. Paul's Cathedral in London. But children, just like adults, have always enjoyed good stories, and the true origins of children's literature can be traced back thousands of years (see Jonathan Gottschall's *The Storytelling Animal* and Brian Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories* on the importance of storytelling in human life and history). Humanity's earliest storytelling experiences were both oral and communal, stories told aloud to an entire community—men, women, and children—a practice still found in many places around the world. At first, little distinction was made between stories for children and stories for adults; everyone enjoyed the same stories, and some stories were simply diluted for the very young (just as today). But over time, and for a variety of reasons, children's literature began to be separated from adult literature, until children's literature finally came to occupy its own niche in the literary canon. Let's see how that happened.

The Earliest Children's Literature

The earliest European literature we know of is that of the ancient Greeks (ca. 850 BCE–150 BCE) and the ancient Romans (ca. 150 BCE–476 CE). Sometime in the eighth century BCE, the Greek poet Homer wrote *The Iliad*, the story of the Trojan War, and *The Odyssey*, the story of Odysseus's travels back home to Ithaka following the war. Even though Homer clearly had adults in mind, these stories have long been popular with children. After all, they contain exotic adventures, wondrous creatures with magical powers, and some of the world's first superheroes—the forerunners of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. These tales are still being told for children, as in Padraic Colum's *The Children's Homer*
Chapter 1  The History of Children’s Literature

(1918), Marcia Williams’s *Greek Myths* (1992), and Jeanne Steig’s somewhat daring *A Gift from Zeus: Sixteen Favorite Myths* (2001).

The Greeks also gave us Aesop’s *Fables*, brief talking animal stories, each with a pointed moral. These include such famous tales as “The Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing” (its moral being “Things aren’t always what they seem”), “The Tortoise and the Hare” (“Slow and steady wins the race”), and “The Ant and the Grasshopper” (“Always be prepared”). Tradition has it that they were written by a teacher named Aesop in Greece around 600 BCE, presumably as lessons for his students. Printed editions date back to the fifteenth century (William Caxton’s *The Fables of Aesop*, 1484), and they remain a staple on children’s bookshelves, with modern versions illustrated by Arnold Lobel (1983), Don Daily (1999), Jerry Pinckney (2000), and Brad Sneed (2003), for readers from about 4 years and older.

The Roman poet Ovid (ca. 43 BCE–17/18 CE) wrote down many of the ancient Greek and Roman myths and legends in his book *Metamorphoses*. He retells, among others, the tales of Hercules, of the famed lovers Pyramus and Thisbe (an inspiration for *Romeo and Juliet*), and of Pygmalion, who sculpted a statue of a woman so beautiful he fell in love with it. Adrian Mitchell’s *Shapeshifters: Tales from Ovid’s Metamorphoses* (2010) is a recent retelling for children. Also for young children are Ursula Dubosarsky’s dramatic versions (2012), which are available electronically for classroom use. The ancient myths have also inspired modern variations, notably Rick Riordan’s popular Percy Jackson series, including the books *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and *The Heroes of Olympus*. So you see, children are not immune to ancient tales; in fact, these oldest of stories remain among the most powerful and most popular.

The Middle Ages

The Middle Ages (approximately the period from the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 to around 1450) was a rather rough-and-tumble period that was kept civilized through the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church. Although education declined during this period, and few people could read, the oral tradition was kept alive. Naturally, all children would have been familiar with the biblical stories—Adam, Eve, and the forbidden fruit; Noah and the flood; Jonah and the great fish; Moses and the parting of the Red Sea; David and Goliath. But a wealth of other adventure stories and hero tales existed as well. Favorites included the adventures of King Arthur, Charlemagne, Roland, and Beowulf. The epic of *Beowulf*, composed sometime between 900 and 1100, tells of the struggles between a great king and a dreadful monster, Grendel, and his even more dreadful mother. It is rather a grizzly tale, as monster stories usually are, but dozens of versions of this story for children are in print, including James Rumford’s recent *Beowulf*, from 2007.

For modern children’s versions of these medieval tales, see Michael Morpurgo’s *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2004), illustrated by Michael Foreman; *Sir Gawain and
The Renaissance

The predominately oral culture of the Middle Ages gradually gave way to the more literate culture of the Renaissance (beginning roughly around 1400, and earlier in some places, like Italy). The Renaissance is usually seen as a flowering of European culture, and people began to look to the sophisticated cultures of ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration (the term Renaissance means "rebirth"—a reference to this return to classical ideals).

Perhaps the most important development of the entire era was the perfection, around 1440, of the movable-type printing press, attributed to Johannes Gutenberg (although the Chinese had actually invented it long before that). No longer did books have to be laboriously copied by hand, but they could be mass produced. Books became cheaper and more plentiful, literacy increased, and learning advanced. In short, the printing press was one of the most influential inventions of the past 1,000 years.

Still, the Renaissance produced very few books specifically for children. Among the earliest were hornbooks (see Figure 1.1), which were not really books but sheets of parchment attached to wooden slabs and covered with transparent horn (from cattle, sheep, and goats), an early form of lamination to make them durable. Hornbooks were used by very young children in school and usually contained simple language lessons (the alphabet, numbers, the Lord's Prayer). One of the first true books for children was John Comenius's Orbis Sensualium Pictus (see Figure 1.2), which appeared in 1658. It is not a storybook but a textbook designed to teach Latin vocabulary—a sort of Latin through pictures. (Every educated person in Europe knew Latin in those days; professors even delivered college lectures in Latin.) One of the most famous schoolbooks of the period was the New England Primer, which first appeared sometime around 1690 and continued in print in some form or another until 1886. It introduced young Puritan children to the alphabet through rhymes (“In Adam's fall/We Sinned all” for the letter A) and moved to increasingly sophisticated reading material—all with a religious intent (see Figure 1.3).

But when literate children wanted to read books for pleasure, they had to turn to adult books, like John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress (1678). Although it is a serious religious allegory about human salvation, it is filled with thrilling adventures and terrifying monsters (much as in Beowulf). These features appealed to young readers from the very beginning. Today hundreds of editions remain in print, including many retold for children, such as that by Geraldine McCaughrean. Equally popular was Daniel Defoe's Robinson
Crusoe (1719), about a man surviving on a strange deserted island. Defoe’s story is still to be found in many modern children’s versions, including one beautifully illustrated by N. C. Wyeth. It has become the prototype for modern survival stories (such as Scott O’Dell’s Island of the Blue Dolphins and Jean Craighead George’s Julie of the Wolves). Survival stories involving young heroes and heroines remain enormously popular with children. Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726) is also a journey tale, one that visits several wildly fanciful lands filled with extraordinary adventures. Gulliver’s story remains available to children in many adapted versions (such as the “Classic Starts” edition of 2006) and has found its way into several film adaptations.
Boyes-Sport

Boys used to play either with Bowling-stones 1. or throwing a Bowl, 2. at Nine-pins, 3. or striking a Ball, through a Ring, 5. with a Bandy, 4. or scourging a Top, 6. with a Whip, 7. or shooting with a Trunk, 8. and a Bow, 9. or going upon Stilts, 10. or tossing and swinging themselves upon a Merryy-totter, 11.


FIGURE 1.2  John Comenius’s Orbis Sensualium Pictus is often considered the first children’s picture book. It first appeared in 1658 as a German/Latin textbook and was an immediate success. It revolutionized Latin instruction, a necessity in a society in which Latin was still the language of scholarship. The English/Latin version, from which this illustration is taken, appeared in 1659. Although the woodcut illustrations are crude, they provide a wealth of information about seventeenth-century European life.
The New England Primer was one of the longest-lived school texts in American history, flourishing from approximately 1690 to 1830. The earliest surviving copy is from 1727, from which these illustrations are taken. Intended to teach the children of the early Puritans how to live a godly life, the book is unashamedly didactic, which is evident even in its rhyming alphabet, recalling a time when church and state were not as separate as they are now.
Three men had an extraordinary influence on children’s reading in the eighteenth century—John Locke, John Newbery, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In 1693, the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) wrote a famous essay called *Thoughts Concerning Education*. Here, he described the minds of young children as blank slates (or in Latin, *tabula rasa*) waiting to be written upon. All children, he argued, had equal capabilities to learn, and adults needed to provide the proper learning environment and suitable material to fill the youthful minds. For Locke, heredity was unimportant, since everyone, he believed, began life on an equal footing, with the same capacity to learn and understand. Thus began the perennial argument over the relative influence of heredity and the environment (that is, nature versus nurture). Today, Locke’s ideas have been seriously challenged by human genetic studies (see Chapter 2; let’s face it, we are not all born with equal abilities), but his belief in the importance of education still drives our schools and universities.

John Newbery (1713–1778) was not a philosopher or a writer. Instead, he was a businessman who hit upon the idea of marketing books especially written for children. His *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* (1744) is considered a landmark in children’s book publishing. It was one of the first children’s books found on sale in a bookshop. Newbery wrote and compiled other books for children—none of them very good—but more importantly, he provided a market for other writers. Now there was a place where children’s books could be purchased, and writing books for children could be lucrative. Without Newbery’s idea, children’s literature as we know it today could never have come about. Newbery was immortalized when the American Library Association established, in 1922, the famous medal that bears his name and is given to what is judged the best children’s book published in the United States.

The third influence was French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), who wrote a book called *Emile* (1762). This work describes Rousseau’s notion of an ideal education, which he believed should emphasize moral development through a simple lifestyle, preferably lived in the country, away from the corrupting influence of the city. Curiously, Rousseau did not encourage reading, which he believed could have a corrupting influence—a belief rather unfortunately held by some people yet today (see “Intellectual Freedom” in Chapter 2). However, he did admire *Robinson Crusoe* and its argument for self-sufficiency. Rousseau inspired many followers who wrote didactic and moralistic books to teach children how to be good and proper human beings.

Among Rousseau’s English followers was Maria Edgeworth (1744–1817), who wrote a popular book titled *Simple Susan* (1796), about a country girl whose goodness helps her to triumph over an ill-intentioned city lawyer. Another disciple of Rousseau was Sarah Trimmer (1741–1810), who wrote *The Story of the Robins* (originally called *Fabulous Histories*, 1786), about a family of robins living side-by-side with a human family who learn from the robins the virtue of kindness. The story was unusual in a time that frowned
on tales of talking animals. (The eighteenth-century rationalists thought it was illogical, and religious zealots thought it unholy.) Mrs. Trimmer carefully pointed out to her young readers that her story is a fable and that animals cannot really talk. She is also famous for condemning fairy stories for children because they were sacrilegious and lacked moral purpose. Mrs. Sherwood (1775–1851), another of the moral writers, wrote The History of the Fairchild Family (1818), which includes frighteningly vivid stories about the souls of impious children moldering in cold graves or being consigned to the fires of hell. This was serious moral stuff.

The Rise of Folktales

Alongside the moralistic tales came something rather refreshing—the revival of the old folktales from the quickly fading oral tradition. Actually, folktales were printed in England as early as 1729. At that time, Tales of Mother Goose, originally retold by the Frenchman Charles Perrault (1628–1703), was first translated and published in English. Although they were not originally for children, these tales, which included “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” and “Sleeping Beauty in the Wood,” soon became staples in English nurseries. John Newbery’s successor, Elizabeth Newbery, published the first children’s edition of the Middle Eastern Tales from the Arabian Nights, featuring Sinbad the Sailor, Aladdin and his lamp, and others, in about 1791.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, two German brothers, Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859) Grimm, collected and published a great number of folktales, and the Grimms’ tales are still the most famous of all collections. The Grimms also inspired a number of folktale collectors throughout Europe, including Hans Christian Andersen in Denmark (who also wrote many of his own original tales) and Asbjørnsen and Moe in Norway, and Joseph Jacobs (English Fairy Tales) and Andrew Lang (The Blue Fairy Book, The Red Fairy Book, and so on) in Great Britain. Folk rhyme collections, variously called Mother Goose rhymes or nursery rhymes, became equally popular (see Figure 1.4).

The Victorian Golden Age

In 1865, Lewis Carroll (pseudonym for Charles Dodgson) published Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, usually considered the first English children’s story written purely for entertainment with no thought toward moral rectitude. The sequel, Through the Looking-Glass, appeared in 1871–1872. These wild fantasies continue to fascinate children (and moviegoers) today, and its unforgettable characters (Alice, the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat,
The Victorian Golden Age

Figure 1.4 Abel Bowen’s woodcut illustration of “The Man in the Moon,” from Mother Goose’s Melodies, dramatically depicts the contrast between the ridiculous and the sublime that underlies much of children’s literature. On the left side, with grace and elegance, a youth descends from the crescent moon; on the right side, a buffoonish character is engaged in a nonsensical act. Dating from 1833, this illustration is among the earliest American children’s books designed purely for the pleasure of young readers.

The man in the moon came down too soon
To inquire the way to Norridge;
The man in the south, he burnt his mouth
With eating cold plum-porridge.
the Jabberwock, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the Red Queen, the White Knight, and many others) are indelibly fixed in English-speaking culture. Carroll's works helped to establish the trend away from eighteenth-century didacticism in children's literature. No longer were children's books viewed as merely vehicles for lessons in living or moral and religious guides. Children's literature was beginning to be seen as entertainment rather than moral and spiritual education.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland heralded things to come. Encouraged by increasing prosperity, a rising middle class, the broadening of public education, and the development of technology, children's literature began to flourish in the later nineteenth century. Soon, high-quality books were appearing chiefly in Great Britain but increasingly in the United States. They covered a broad literary spectrum, including

- **Adventure stories** (R. M. Ballantyne's The Coral Island, 1857, and Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, 1876)—often set in exotic places in the far-flung British Empire or in the vastness of America;
- **Series books** (Oliver Optic's Outward Bound; or, Young America Afloat, 1867, and Horatio Alger, Jr., Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York, 1867)—also adventure stories for boys, but usually with an educational or moral purpose, which were very popular in America;
- **Historical novels** (Robert Louis Stevenson's Kidnapped, 1886, and Howard Pyle's Otto of the Silver Hand, 1888)—usually adventure stories, but set in some romantic or exotic past;
- **Domestic and family stories** (Charlotte Yonge's The Daisy Chain, 1856, and Louisa May Alcott's Little Women, 1868)—usually intended as fare for girls, about the joys, trials, and tribulations of family life;
- **School stories** (Thomas Hughes's Tom Brown's School Days, 1857, and Edward Eggleston's The Hoosier Schoolmaster, 1871)—a counterpart to domestic and family stories but for boys and with a school setting where boys could have adventures beyond the watchful eyes of their parents (many of these stories take place in boarding schools);
- **Fantasies** (George MacDonald's The Princess and the Goblin, 1872, and L. Frank Baum's The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, 1900)—following in the path of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, stories set in magical lands or about magical interventions in our own world;
- **Poetry** (Edward Lear's A Book of Nonsense, 1846, and Robert Louis Stevenson's A Child's Garden of Verses, 1885)—some delightfully nonsensical (Lear), others charming and sentimental (Stevenson); and
- **Folktales** (Andrew Lang's The Blue Fairy Book, 1889, and Joseph Jacobs's English Fairy Tales, 1890)—following in the tradition of the brothers Grimm.
In addition, by the mid-1800s, printing technology had perfected color printing, and this attracted many fine illustrators to the field of children's books. Walter Crane (see Figure 1.5) and George Cruikshank were among the pioneers in this arena. Randolph Caldecott (1846–1886) brought a lively humor to his illustrations (see Figure 1.6). Kate Greenaway (1846–1901) depicted a charming and carefree Victorian childhood in her illustrations of popular nursery rhymes and poems (see Figure 5.4). Their illustrations set the standard for the age and are admired today. A little later, Beatrix Potter became a sensation with *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901), which she both wrote and illustrated (see Chapter 6, Color Plate A). Her books are still in print and much loved, perhaps in part because Potter followed her own advice: “I think the great point in writing for children is to have something to say and to say it in simple, direct language” (quoted in Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature*, 88). The later nineteenth century is widely regarded as the Golden Age of children's literature—and certainly it was the period during which children's literature came into its own.
Chapter 1  The History of Children’s Literature

The Early Twentieth Century

The early twentieth century continued the rich tradition of the nineteenth and gave us such classic fantasies as J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1904), about the boy who would not grow up; Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), about the irrepressible Rat, Mole, Badger, and Mr. Toad of Toad Hall; and A. A. Milne’s ever-popular *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926).

FIGURE 1.6  Randolph Caldecott, the great nineteenth-century English illustrator, was one of the pioneers of children’s book illustration. His art is characterized by an economy of line and a playfulness of manner that make his work appealing today, more than a century after his death. The American Library Association annually awards the Caldecott Medal, named in his honor, to what it judges the most distinguished picture book published in the United States. This illustration from *The Frog He Would A-Wooing Go* (1883) depicts Caldecott’s lively sense of humor.
Realistic novels continued to gain a foothold. Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911) is the story of Mary Lennox, initially a rather unappealing heroine, who ultimately finds her redemption on the bleak English moors. The book, which continues to be popular, is rich in Gothic atmosphere and mysterious characters.

If children’s literature was no longer so didactic as in the eighteenth century, much of it nevertheless remained conservative, particularly the realistic fiction. In America we find the much-loved semi-autobiographical series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, beginning with *The Little House in the Big Woods* (1932). The celebration of the pioneer spirit has a distinctly patriotic ring to it, and the attitude toward Native Americans seems a bit uncomfortable to some modern readers, although the books themselves are rather less preachy than the 1970s television adaptions.

Wilder’s works were among many of the first half of the twentieth century that celebrated the family. Carol Ryrie Brink’s *Caddie Woodlawn* (1935) is, in the Wilder vein, also a frontier/family story. And Eleanor Estes’s *The Moffats* (1941), the first of a series, is set just after World War I.

Fantasy has always been quick to challenge the status quo. P. L. Travers’s *Mary Poppins* (1934), a collection of wildly fanciful stories about an eccentric nanny, has raised many an adult eyebrow because of the title character’s outrageous behavior. (Indeed, her nature was dramatically softened in the 1964 Disney movie.) And we find another challenge to the status quo when Theodore Geisel began writing unorthodox picture books under the pseudonym Dr. Seuss. J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasy, *The Hobbit; or, There and Back Again* (1937), is the prequel to his great trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, a fantasy for young adults and adults. But *The Hobbit* is quite suitable for children, with its lovable, self-deprecating hero, Bilbo Baggins. The story is high fantasy, featuring dramatic battles, fanciful creatures, very real dangers, and just a touch of humor.

The Late Twentieth Century and Beyond

World War II changed the world dramatically—and it changed children’s literature. The collapse of totalitarian regimes at the end of World War II spelled the end of the old class systems; socialism was on the rise, and education was seen as the means of overcoming the ignorance and prejudice that had contributed to the war. Studies in child psychology, especially those by Jean Piaget, and advances in early childhood education, such as those made by Maria Montessori (whose work actually began in the early 1900s), helped to refocus concerns on the development of the child as an individual. Then, in 1946, Dr. Benjamin Spock published *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, which revolutionized how society as a whole looked at children. Spock’s influence was widespread, and he used it to advocate for the personal needs of the child over the requirements of society, which in turn nurtured such movements as the empowerment of children in the classroom, the advocacy of children’s rights in the legal system, and, indeed,
the entire “youth culture” that has dominated Western society for the past half century. In such an atmosphere, children’s literature was bound to flourish, but it would be a literature that would thrive on bold, independent-minded young heroes and heroines. And it would explore all facets of childhood and young-adulthood—the good, the bad, and the ugly, as they say.

In fantasy, a number of series have appeared in the past 50 years that have remained favorites of children. These include C. S. Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia (The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, 1950, and sequels); Mary Norton’s The Borrowers (1952) and sequels; Lucy Boston’s The Children of Green Knowe (1954) and sequels; Lloyd Alexander’s Prydain chronicles (The Book of Three, 1965, and sequels); and Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea series (beginning with A Wizard of Earthsea, 1967). Books such as E. B. White’s Charlotte’s Web (1952) and Natalie Babbitt’s Tuck Everlasting (1975) have been accorded status as modern fantasy classics. And, of course, J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series (beginning with Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, 1998) has been nothing short of a publishing and cinematic phenomenon. Suzanne Collins’s The Hunger Games (2008) and its sequels are enjoying a similarly enthusiastic reception, and, in their depiction of a frightening and impersonal future world, they show us how fantasy can be both compelling and thought provoking.

Similarly, in realistic fiction, the trend has been toward greater realism in children’s books. Beverly Cleary, whose Ramona books remain immensely popular, have perpetuated the traditional family story. But others have given us a less romanticized vision of the family: the broken family, the troubled family, the dysfunctional family. Judy Blume and others helped to introduce the so-called problem novel, which focuses on some crisis of childhood or adolescence; for example, Cleary addressed the trauma of divorce in her Newbery Award–winning Dear Mr. Henshaw.

The other notable trend in modern realism is what has come to be known as the new realism, characterized by a franker and more open approach to subjects once thought taboo in children’s books: sexuality, violence, drugs, war, and so on. It was perhaps J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye (1951), a book for adolescents rather than children, that signaled the trend toward greater realism, harsher language, and a willingness to face head-on the problems of growing up. Through the 1950s it was virtually impossible to find a children’s book that included any but white children. African American writers such as Virginia Hamilton, Mildred Taylor, Walter Dean Myers, and Christopher Paul Curtis have sought to correct the cultural disparity that once prevailed in children’s literature. The disparity is still apparent, but at least it is now possible to find books about African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Among the most popular children’s writers in America today is Grace Lin, daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, whose novels for young readers (The Year of the Dog (2006) and others) capture the true multicultural experience in very positive, and humorous, ways.

In another arena, children’s and young adult books are being addressed to the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) community as society continues to become more inclusive and tolerant. A surprising number of these books are actually picture books for very young readers, perhaps the most famous being Michael Willhoite’s
Daddy's Roommate, which first appeared in 1991. For older readers, Alex Sanchez, author of the Rainbow Boys series; M. E. Kerr, author of Deliver Us from Evie; and Francesca Lia Block, author of the quirky Weetzie Bat books, are just some of the writers bringing this conversation into the mainstream.

Modern children's poetry has grown widely diverse. It includes those heirs of Edward Lear's wonderfully outrageous Book of Nonsense, such as Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein. And there are more serious poets, including David McCord, Myra Cohn Livingston, Jack Prelutsky, Valerie Worth, JoArno Lawson and many others, who share their joy of language with children of all ages.

And finally, in the field of children's illustration, the postwar era has seen some stunning work. Consummate artists like Maurice Sendak, Michael Foreman, David Macaulay, Barbara Cooney, Chris Van Allsburg, Margot Zemach, John Burningham, Ashley Bryan, Lauren Child, and Mo Willems, to name just a few, have given children some of the most imaginative and beautiful picture books that have ever been created. Of particular note are the so-called postmodern picture books (such as the imaginative work of David Wiesner and Emily Gravett), which experiment with the traditional linear plot, play with literary devices, and are aware of themselves as books.

In the past 100 years, the field of children's literature had gained considerably in prestige. This has been most notably marked by the creation of numerous children's book awards. In the United States came the Newbery Medal in 1922, for the best American children's book of the year, and, in 1938, its counterpart for best illustration, the Caldecott Medal (named for Randolph Caldecott). In Great Britain came the Carnegie Medal for literature and the Greenaway Medal for illustration. Lifetime achievement awards have been added, such as the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, named for the beloved author of the Little House books. And on the international level are the Hans Christian Andersen Award and the Astrid Lindgren Award. (The latter two are international awards open to children's writers everywhere.) The world over, we can find hundreds of medals, awards, citations, and other recognitions now showered upon talented children's authors and illustrations—a sure sign that the field has come of age.

Children's Literature around the World

Indeed, the field of children's literature has grown worldwide, and many of the best works have been translated into English. We have room to mention only some of the most famous and influential works of the past two centuries.

The Adventures of Pinocchio (1883), by the Italian author Carlo Collodi, is the world's most famous puppet story, with its familiar theme of a toy wishing to be alive. France has given us Jean de Brunhoff, the creator of The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant (1931), the first of a series of picture books (seven in all) about a little elephant who becomes a wise and benevolent ruler. And Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's The Little Prince (1943), also French,
remains a fantasy classic for all ages. Germany, in addition to the brothers Grimm, also boasts Heinrich Hoffmann, who wrote *Struwwelpeter* (1845), a collection of cautionary tales that some view as hilarious and others as horrifying. Felix Salten's *Bambi* (1923) and Erich Kästen's *Emil and the Detectives* (1929) are two modern German works that have become classics. Sweden's Selma Lagerlöf, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1909, wrote *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (in two volumes, 1906–1907), a highly imaginative work of fantasy. In 1945 Astrid Lindgren, the best-known Swedish children's author, wrote *Pippi Longstocking*, the fanciful story of a remarkable girl with superhuman strength, unconventional values, and complete independence—in other words, every child's hero. The Finnish writer Tove Jansson created the Moomin family in a popular series of books beginning with *Comet in Moominland* (1946). These books about the gentle Moomins and their eccentric friends contain a healthy dose of philosophy as their adventures and misadventures unfold in a delightfully amorphous way.

Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have all made significant contributions to children's literature, particularly in the twentieth century. Among the early Canadian writers are the naturalists Ernest Thompson Seton (*Wild Animals I Have Known*, 1898) and Charles G. D. Roberts (*Red Fox*, 1905), who are usually credited with inventing the realistic animal story. Perhaps the most famous Canadian writer, Lucy Maud Montgomery (*Anne of Green Gables*, 1908), wrote domestic stories about life on Prince Edward Island. Modern trends include literature by and about the native peoples of Canada (Basil Johnston's *Tales the Elders Told: Ojibway Legends*, 1981). One of the most famous contemporary Canadians in children's literature is author/illustrator Jon Klassen, who has won the Canadian Governor General's Award for illustration (for *Cat's Night Out* by Carolyn Stutson, 2010) and the Caldecott Medal for *This Is Not My Hat*, 2012).

Kate Langloh Parker's *Australian Legendary Tales* (1896) was one of the first books to explore aboriginal legends. Among the best-known modern Australian children's writers are Patricia Wrightson, much of whose work is based on aboriginal traditions (*The Ice Is Coming*, 1977), and Ivan Southall, a writer of vivid survival stories, often with bleak endings (*Ash Road*, 1965), and more recently Mem Fox and illustrator Bob Graham. And New Zealand's most celebrated children's author, Margaret Mahy, twice won the prestigious Carnegie Medal (for *The Haunting*, 1981, and *The Changeover*, 1983).

Summary

Children's literature has been around for a long time and has enjoyed a wide variety of influences, from the ancient Greeks, whose wondrous mythological tales still enthral us, to the rich diversity of the twenty-first century. We have also seen that the good stories never grow old and, significantly, children do not seem to care how old a story is—they just know a good one when they hear it. But, of course, we have seen decided changes as well, particularly from the day when John Newbery was selling children's books from his
London shop in the eighteenth century. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, children's literature started to become far broader in its interests and more inclusive in its appeal, as well as more experimental. It was then that truly talented writers and illustrators turned to creating books for children.

One of the most satisfying developments of the past 50 years has been the increasing diversity—racial, ethnic, gender, social, and so on—in children's books and children's writers. Another important development has been the broadening scope of children's books. We now see books for children on virtually every subject—including some very controversial ones, such as war, abuse, and sexuality. Children's illustrators continue to explore new artistic styles and media, and children's picture books have achieved a new depth and sophistication. This is not to say, though, that the field is not still crowded with the mediocre, the cheap, and the tawdry. Such books are found in great abundance. But we do have choices. Treasures are out there, but we have to know what we are looking for.

As we move through the twenty-first century, we trust that the demand for excellence in children's literature continues, for without reading, our civilization would disintegrate in a single generation. The ideas of our past would be lost forever, forcing humanity once again naked into the world. As students of children's literature, our great purpose is to bring the joy of reading to the next generation, giving them the tools they will need to build a better world than their parents have known.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Choose a Greek or Roman myth or tale that has been retold for children (versions by Padraic Colum, Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire, Jeanne Steig, Marcia Williams and others). Compare this version with an account taken from Ovid or some other adult reference source from ancient times. How has the adaptation changed the story?

2. Compare two or more versions of an ancient Greek, Roman, or medieval hero story. What seem to be the messages? What are the major differences?

3. Identify what specific influences John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Newbery had on children's literature. Do you find yourself agreeing with the ideas of one over another? Explain.

4. Choose a prominent eighteenth-century author of children's books. (Use the chapter or explore on your own to find names.) Research the author's background. Read one or more works by the same authors and compare the style and content to that of modern children's books.

5. Make a list of the major changes in books for children from the eighteenth century to today—consider such things as the subject matter, the treatment, and the
physical layout. Explain what specifically brought about these changes. Choose any modern picture storybook or children's novel that you know well. How would the story and the book have been different if it had appeared in the eighteenth century? In the nineteenth century? In the early twentieth century?

Works Cited

• Including “Arachne,” “Echo and Narcissus,” “Icarus,” “Pygmalion,” and others.


Recommended Resources


Meigs, Cornelia, Elizabeth Nesbitt, Anne Thaxter Eaton, and Ruth Hill. A Critical History of
Recommended Resources

Introduction

The eminent psychologist Carl Gustav Jung wrote, “In studying the history of the human mind one is impressed again and again by the fact that the growth of the mind is the widening of the range of consciousness, and that each step forward has been a most painful and laborious achievement” (Contributions to Analytical Psychology 340). It is commonplace to regard childhood as an idyllic and carefree time, but, as Jung suggests, childhood and adolescence are perhaps the most difficult, the most challenging, years of our lives. We are born completely helpless, unable to walk, talk, or feed ourselves. With each day, we are confronted with something new, something that causes us to reevaluate our ideas of the world around us, and we are forced continually to adapt to that world. All things considered, we might wonder how many adults could cope with the dramatic transformations that infants and toddlers experience on a daily basis. The child’s ability to adapt and to absorb so much in so short a time is a marvel.

In this chapter, we will take a brief look at the various ways children develop, especially in the formative years between birth and the age of 6 or 7, and we will consider specifically how that development impacts their reading habits and tastes. As adults, we often underestimate children. It is good to remind ourselves how keen their perceptions are, how quickly they grasp concepts, and how sharply their imaginations work—for these are issues that directly influence the types of books they enjoy (or could be enjoying). Also in this chapter, we will consider issues tangentially related to child development and reading: the introduction of sensitive topics into children’s books, the use of bibliotherapy, and the concept of intellectual freedom. In one way or another, all these issues are connected to children’s intellectual, emotional, and social development.
Chapter 2  Literature and the Child

Language Acquisition

Before we look at the developmental theories, it might be helpful if we consider the one human ability that makes literature itself possible: the ability to use language to communicate. One area in which children seem to excel beyond the expectations of adults is language acquisition. It is amazing that in five short years, children can master the abstract concept of attaching meanings to certain sounds (words) and to organize those sounds into intelligible patterns (sentences) to convey those meanings.

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whom we will examine more closely in Chapter 3, was interested in how children learn language. He argued that language is, in fact, a way of thinking about something—that our ability to formulate words, to put ideas into words, actually helps us to think and to understand. (Anyone who has talked through personal problems with a friend or therapist or used a diary or journal to help sort out personal conflicts will understand Vygotsky's point.)

Steven Pinker, a psychologist who has studied human thought and language, is convinced that language acquisition is innate. He argues that we are born with the ability to memorize the meanings of words and their various forms (such as verb tenses) and to assimilate the rules of grammar and syntax of the language that we hear on a daily basis. Very young children possess a linguistic plasticity, or malleability, that extends to their abilities to create sounds. Despite the popular notion that pronunciation is difficult for children, they often have a much easier time of it than do most adults. Indeed, the time for children to start learning a second language is when they’re in preschool or the early elementary grades—when it’s easier to memorize, to make new sounds, and to adapt to new language patterns. It is a pity that the U.S. educational system, with some notable exceptions, has neglected this opportunity.

All this research shows that as adults—and as teachers—we should build on children’s language abilities and their natural curiosity about sound, sense, and language. The books they read or that we read to them should be expanding their vocabulary—not accommodating it. Most children love language and love practicing it. Even the simplest Mother Goose rhymes offer exciting and challenging vocabulary, with their nonsense words and archaisms. Difficult vocabulary rarely discourages a child. Take, for example, Old Mother Hubbard, who successively went to the joiner’s, the fishmonger’s, the cobbler’s, and the hosier’s; or the crooked man who went a crooked mile and “found a crooked six-pence against a crooked stile.” In neither case do the obscure words spoil the child’s pleasure in the rhyme. In fact, we might go so far as to say that a book without any challenging words is a book wasted.

Modern Theories of Child Development

If we are to help children find the best and most appropriate books, we need to have some knowledge of child development, and what follows here is only the briefest survey of three of the most influential modern theories of child development. Jean Piaget was concerned
with intellectual or cognitive development, Erik Erikson with social development, and Lawrence Kohlberg with the development of moral judgment. All three individuals viewed human development as occurring in a series of stages through which children pass on their way to maturity. Progressing through these stages is like climbing a mountain: If we don’t have sure footing or a firm grasp, we will slip back down. Likewise, we find backsliding in human development: The progress is not always forward. Also, the movement through stages is gradual, almost imperceptible, and different individuals develop at different rates. Consequently, the age spans mentioned here are only approximations.

We should note that these theories have been criticized for ignoring female development, which, some argue, is not the same as male development. Males, for example, generally value competition, self-assertiveness, individual rights, and social rules. Females, on the other hand, tend to value human relationships, responsibility to others, cooperation, community values, and tolerance for opposing viewpoints. In addition, some argue that females reach these developmental stages more quickly than males do. Another criticism of these theories is that they neglect minority groups, whose values are often quite different from those of the majority. Nevertheless, these theories are helpful as a general guide—so long as we remember their limitations.

Jean Piaget and Cognitive Development

The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) is famous for his theory of cognitive development, which attempts to explain how we comprehend the world around us. In the 1920s and 1930s, Piaget outlined four major periods of intellectual development, some of which he subdivided into stages. What follows is a very broad overview of these stages.

SENSORIMOTOR PERIOD: BIRTH TO 2 YEARS  ■ During this earliest period, Piaget argues, children are entirely egocentric (they are unaware of the needs of others), and they experience the world entirely through their senses (what they can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell—they cannot be told about experiences). For them, books are objects to feel and manipulate with their hands—once they’ve learned that books are not objects to eat. For infants, durable cardboard and cloth books are great introductions to reading. And, naturally, it is chiefly through the pictures that very young children respond to books. Tactile books, such as Dorothy Kunhardt’s classic, Pat the Bunny, allow them to touch and feel. Sounds fascinate them (even nonsense words), and so it is that they enjoy being read to, even if they don’t always comprehend what a story is about. Very early, they respond to the sounds and rhythms of nursery rhymes (“Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater,” “Hickory Dickory Dock,” and others). Most important is that they are getting acquainted with books, learning to hold books, to turn pages, and to connect language and books.

PREOPERATIONAL PERIOD: 2 TO 7 YEARS  ■ The second of Piaget’s periods is the time when children acquire and refine their motor skills. They become less egocentric and start making friends. Although they still don’t think logically, they can use symbols to represent ideas (after all, that’s what written language is—a symbolic representation of ideas).
And, although children can grasp certain concepts—colors, shapes, opposites, the forms and sounds of letters of the alphabet, and counting objects—they still understand things only in concrete terms. In the early years of this period, children find alphabet, counting, and concept books fascinating. Most 3-year-olds can memorize letters of the alphabet or the numbers from 1 to 20 and beyond. In fact, because of their excellent recall, preschoolers often appear far more knowledgeable than they actually are. Also, they tend to give human qualities to everything (a concept known as *animism*), which helps explain their fondness for books about talking animals and animated toys and machines (such as folktales or stories like Virginia Lee Burton's *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny*, and Dorothy Cronin's *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*).

Eventually, they no longer require pictures to help tell the stories. By the final years of this developmental period, when they reach about second grade, children have learned to read and comprehend the fundamental ideas of plot, conflict, and character. Now they are ready to move on to a new level of understanding.

**PERIOD OF CONCRETE OPERATIONS: 7 TO 12 YEARS**

Although they still have difficulty with abstract ideas, children in this third period are able to apply a kind of logic to their thinking. They are capable of understanding these basic concepts of logic:

- **Conservation**—understanding that quantity is unaffected by appearance (a tall, thin glass may hold just as much water as a short, chubby glass);
- **Reversibility**—understanding that some actions (such as a knot in a shoestring) can be undone;
- **Assimilation**—using what we already know to explain new information (a St. Bernard and a Chihuahua are both dogs); and
- **Accommodation**—revising what we already know to explain new information (not all creatures with four legs are dogs).

Children in this stage begin to lay aside the picture books, which they now see as “babyish.” (But this doesn’t mean they don’t still enjoy some of them.) Now they begin reading chapter books. (That perennial favorite, E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, is typically read in second grade.) Children are now able to grasp the concept of history and the passage of time (and can therefore enjoy Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* books). As they begin to seek their identity, they turn to books such as Judy Blume’s *Blubber* and *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* or Lois Lowry’s *Anastasia* series, so they can read about children like themselves.

**PERIOD OF FORMAL OPERATIONS: 12 TO 15 YEARS**

Finally, the fourth period occurs between the ages of about 12 and 15 (when most children reach full cognitive maturity). In these early teen years, young people begin to use formal logic and engage in a true
exchange of ideas, comprehending the viewpoints of others and understanding what it means to live in a society. Having entered adolescence, most are ready for more mature topics, such as love, sexuality, social issues, and even politics.

Erik Erikson and Psychosocial Development

Whereas Piaget was interested in how we develop intellectually, Erik Erikson (1902–1994) explored how we develop socially and psychologically. He classified the maturation process into a series of psychosocial conflicts, each of which must be resolved before one can move on to the next, in much the same way that Piaget saw successive levels in cognitive development. This is part of the “painful and laborious achievement” to which Jung was referring. Erikson's theory includes five principal stages of development throughout childhood, which complement, not compete with, Piaget's stages.

TRUST VERSUS MISTRUST: BIRTH TO 18 MONTHS
During this first stage, children have little option but to trust those who are their caregivers. However, at the same time, they must overcome fears such as abandonment when they are put to sleep in their own beds (which is why bedtime is often so difficult for some children). Books for this stage can provide both security and reassurance. Margaret Wise Brown's classic, Goodnight Moon, has long been popular with the very young. It exudes warmth and coziness, as we observe a little bunny saying goodnight to all his favorite possessions in his womb-like bedroom. The repetitive patterns in both text and illustration are comfortably reassuring. Children in this stage also like hearing familiar books read night after night; these books become like old, reliable friends, providing stability and a sense of security.

AUTONOMY VERSUS DOUBT: 18 MONTHS TO 3 YEARS
Now that they can walk and talk, children begin to experiment with their independence. At the same time, however, they are wary of their abilities. Crockett Johnson's imaginative story Harold and the Purple Crayon, about a boy who creates his own world with a magical crayon, charmingly portrays an autonomous child who proves capable of handling his newfound independence—and extricating himself from some interesting dilemmas. The story might appeal nicely to children who are exploring their own imaginative world—often with crayons (and not always on paper). At the same time, they are also beginning to grasp the concept of right and wrong and may feel guilt when they make the wrong choices.

INITIATIVE VERSUS GUILT: 3 TO 6 YEARS
At this stage, children first begin to realize they have responsibilities (potty training springs to mind). Children want to take the initiative to do things on their own and to decide what to do and when to do it. In Ezra Jack Keats's Peter's Chair, young Peter exhibits hostility when his parents decide to paint all his baby furniture pink for his new sister. Peter “runs away”—a common ploy at this stage exhibiting the child's attempt at independence—and camps outside their apartment. But he
soon realizes that home is where he wants to be, baby sister and all, and offers his furniture to his sister. Peter has arrived at a higher stage of psychosocial development, which is shown by his willingness to change his attitude and behavior. Such a book both validates a child’s feelings and shows at least one method of coping with them.

**INDUSTRY VERSUS INFERIORITY: 7 TO 11 YEARS** At this stage, children desire to achieve success, often working in concert with others. At the same time, however, they have a tendency to measure themselves against their peers and often feel inferior. Books such as Beverly Cleary’s *Henry Huggins* and *Ramona the Pest* help young readers explore these desires for both personal achievement and acceptance and friendship.

**IDENTITY VERSUS ROLE CONFUSION: 11 YEARS AND BEYOND** As they move toward adolescence, young people begin to discover who they are (individually, socially, and culturally). They are torn between the familiar security of childhood and the natural, if uneasy, desire to become adults. Louise Fitzhugh’s *Harriet the Spy* is a seriocomic story about a girl dealing with just these issues. In this book, Fitzhugh sugarcoats nothing and provides no easy solutions; in other words, she tells the readers exactly what they need to hear. Soon young people in this age group seek out books that show other young people struggling with identity. Judy Blume’s popular *Are You There, God? It’s Me Margaret*, the story of a girl facing her first menses along with a crisis in religious belief, is a perennial favorite for girls at this stage. Most readers at this stage crave openness and honesty, preferring stories about others like themselves (realism), but many also find pleasure in escapist tales (fantasy, science fiction, and so on).

**Lawrence Kohlberg and Moral Development**

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987) studied the development of moral reasoning and moral judgment—that is, how individuals determine what is right and wrong. Also, like Piaget and Erickson, he saw development occurring in a series of stages through which an individual passes to moral maturity (at least, ideally). Kohlberg identifies three levels of development—Preconventional, Conventional, and Postconventional—each subdivided into two stages, which he called “orientations.” The first two levels are most important for our purposes.

**PRECONVENTIONAL LEVEL** The very youngest children are not aware of social conventions—being polite, using manners, and so on. Initially, right and wrong are simply a matter of what does and does not result in punishment or what pleases others. Children remain in the Preconventional Level throughout much of elementary school.

The first stage is *Punishment/Obedience Orientation*, when children obey rules because the rules come from some authority figure (a parent or a preschool teacher) or because they wish to avoid punishment. In Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, we see Peter’s
sisters obeying their mother and enjoying delicious currant buns at the end of the story, whereas Peter, who disobeyed the rules, suffers in bed with a cold. Obedience to authority has some obvious advantages.

The second stage is Self-Interest Orientation, when children believe that “right” behavior is any action that helps them. In other words, the first question is “What's in it for me?” Take Templeton the rat in E. B. White's Charlotte's Web, a thoroughly self-centered creature who helps out only if he is promised food—that is, only if there is something in it for him. The character of Templeton shows us that this selfishness is unattractive and potentially destructive. It is, of course, Wilbur whom we are to emulate, doing things to bring happiness to others.

CONVENTIONAL LEVEL ■ The second level is generally not reached until adolescence, when individuals finally understand and observe social conventions. It is the stage in which most adults operate, and it also has two parts.

During the first stage, Interpersonal Concordance (or “Good Boy/Good Girl”) Orientation, one's behavior is governed by a desire to have the approval of others. This usually occurs in the early teenage years, and the appearance of “cliques” and the need to conform are familiar aspects of adolescence. Many books for children in middle school and early high school focus on just these issues, such as Beverly Cleary's Dear Mr. Henshaw, about a young boy's difficulty dealing with his parents' divorce and his feeling like an outsider.

“Law and Order” Orientation involves individuals conforming in order to abide by the law and accept their obligations as members of society. People at this stage are aware of their place in the world and demonstrate concern for others—two important signs of maturity. Mildred Taylor's Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, about an African American girl coming of age in the 1930s in the Deep South where she encounters hateful racial discrimination, is a good example of this orientation. Robert Cormier's The Chocolate War, about unscrupulous behavior in a private school, explores the issue of maintaining personal integrity when it comes up against peer pressure and social conformity.

POSTCONVENTIONAL LEVEL ■ Kohlberg felt that most people never reach this final level, in which individuals act in the interest of the welfare of others or of society as a whole; this is usually called the Social Contract Orientation. And the highest level, Principled Conscience Orientation, people act out of regard for ethical principles or their own conscience. (Those at this level are chiefly martyrs and saints.)

The best children's literature is in touch with the intellectual, psychological, and sociological interests of its intended audience. As children develop, they put aside certain books and move on to others that are both more challenging and better suited to their developmental needs. In very young children, these transitions occur rapidly, and in the course of a very few years, they outgrow the nursery rhymes and picture books and require more complex stories, more compelling characters, and more probing themes.
Child Development and Reading

Closely related to the concept of child development is the idea that a child’s understanding of certain subjects is related to his or her intellectual and emotional development. But our notions about what very young children can or ought to understand have changed rather dramatically in the past several decades. Whereas adults once felt that children should be sheltered from any of life’s unpleasantness, many now believe that we should be preparing them for these eventualities. Life, under the best of circumstances, is not easy, and children discover this all too soon, despite the concerted efforts of well-meaning adults to protect them from its harsh realities. Marriages end in divorce, loved ones die, violence disrupts cities, war disrupts society. Oftentimes, the very books that children need to be reading are the ones that adults want to keep from them—books about death, about divorce, about violence and war. Although, as adults, our first instinct is to protect and shelter our children from the hard facts of life, we should, instead, be preparing them. Now, this doesn’t mean that we should go around bursting their bubbles of optimism and idealism. Preparing them for the hard facts of life can be done with sensitivity.

The conflicting ideas about what is and what is not suitable for young readers have resulted in some interesting controversies in the field of children’s books, and we will now look briefly at some of these issues. Chapter 11 continues these discussions for older readers.

Sexuality

Sexuality has always been one of the most difficult issues for adults to broach with children. Some households avoid discussions of sex like the plague—apparently because the adults think that if they don’t talk about it, it will go away. But in a world where eight-year-old girls are getting pregnant and deadly diseases are transmitted through sexual behavior, we cannot afford to stand on ceremony. Fortunately, a large number of honest and accurate books are now available to assist those diffident adults in getting the necessary information to children. Take, for example, the light-hearted (but effective) Mommy Laid an Egg by Babette Cole, or It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health by Robie Harris (illustrated by Michael Emberley).

Books with LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) themes are more commonly intended for older children, but there are notable exceptions. Michael Willhoite’s Daddy’s Roommate, first published in 1991, is a picture book for preschoolers describing the weekends a young boy spends with his father and his father’s male partner. You might wonder about the appropriateness of this subject for so young an audience. But today, in fact, many children are raised by gay couples. Daddy’s Roommate provides honest, sensitive treatment of a subject many people find difficult to discuss. The simple illustrations and straightforward story told by a child narrator provide just the right amount of information for very young readers, and the book concludes with the statement that
being gay is just “one more kind of love.” It is never too early to begin the campaign to stamp out bigotry and prejudice. Leslea Newman and Diana Souza’s *Heather Has Two Mommies* is a sort of counterpart to Willhoite’s book, in which a lesbian couple is raising a child.

No one is suggesting that teachers should use these books in their classrooms; few of them were ever intended for that. But it is important for us to realize that these issues are not isolated, and they affect a broad spectrum of our population. Knowing about some of these titles, being aware that these subjects are dealt with in good children’s books, will come in handy at some point—for everyone. Learning about the difficult issues of life through reputable books, sensitively written, and under the guidance of a caring and knowledgeable adult is surely preferable to picking up rumor and misinformation from the streets and playgrounds. See Chapter 11 for a discussion of sexuality in books for older readers.

**Death and Dying**

Death is often the first of life’s hard hurdles that children must confront—the deaths of pets, grandparents, and even, sadly, parents, siblings, and friends. As much as we would like to shelter our children from this, perhaps life’s greatest sorrow, it just is not possible—nor is it wise to try. Although they cannot provide the answers (nothing or no one can), good books on the subject can help the very young deal with these issues. The best books on dying deal in metaphors we can grasp and resist the temptation to offer simple platitudes.

It is important to remember that not everyone shares our own spiritual outlook and that there are many different ways to look at death. Not everyone is assuaged by a promise of an afterlife, as in Christianity or Islam. Some cultures, like Hinduism and Buddhism, embrace the concept of reincarnation. Other cultures, like Judaism, place the emphasis on this life and daily living—and not an afterlife. So when approaching the idea of death with children other than our own, it is wise for us to respect other beliefs and honor other cultures.

Regardless of one’s personal convictions about death, such a loss is painful. The sorrow is difficult and necessary, but it is not permanent. And that is probably the best message for very youngest readers. Margaret Wise Brown’s *The Dead Bird* is a simple picture book about a group of children who find a dead bird and proceed to give it a burial. After the obsequies, which are solemn and touching, the children soon find themselves engaged once again in play—back about the business of their lives, as they should be. Death is presented as part of the natural cycle of life, as *The Book of Common Prayer* correctly tells us, “In the midst of life, we are in death.”

Sometimes, death is approached metaphorically—that is, the writer uses symbols to convey his or her ideas, which can help to make a complex idea more easily understood. An example is Oliver Jeffers’s *The Heart and the Bottle*, in which a young girl’s grief over the death of her father—which is only implied, never obliquely stated—causes her to “bottle up” her heart. But keeping her heart in the bottle also prevents her from moving on with her own life and experiencing other feelings, such as happiness or wonder. Only when she has accepted the loss and recognized that beauty and joy still exist in the world is she able
to let her heart out of the bottle and once again embrace life—while still keeping the good memories.

Wolf Erlbruch’s *Duck, Death and the Tulip* is, at first glance, a rather startling book (see Figure 2.1). It tells the story of Death, personified as a skeletal figure clad in a long plaid coat, who builds a relationship with the inquisitive Duck, who wants to know what death is like. At one point, we even see Duck attempting to comfort Death, who experiences a chill. When her own end approaches and Duck herself suddenly feels cold, she asks her

![Figure 2.1](image.png)

**FIGURE 2.1** In this illustration from Wolf Erlbruch’s *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, the figure of Death, with a skeletal face but dressed in comfortable plaid with warm mittens, gazes almost sympathetically upon Duck, who has just died.
friend, Death, to help keep her warm. Duck then dies quietly, and Death, after laying a tulip on her, gently places her lifeless body in the great river (the book does not broach the subject of an afterlife) and nudges her on her way. Death itself is almost moved by Duck's passing but then utters the final line: "But that's Life." With its message that we all walk with death and that death itself is part of life, as natural as birth, growth, and love, and not an enemy, this moving picture book presents life and death as seamless parts of a beautiful process (perhaps symbolized by the tulip, which is never actually referred to in the text). Without speculating on religious implications or diminishing the sense of loss, Erlbruch offers a simple, straightforward view of this inscrutable subject and makes it accessible for even very young children.

War and Violence

Surprisingly, we can find books for very young children on such unlikely subjects as war and its grim effects and even street violence. Why introduce such elements into a child's book? Sadly, we cannot shelter children from the effects of these dreadful experiences. Today in America, far too many children know the tragedy of losing a parent to war. We would not expect children to understand the politics of war, or its history, or its purpose (do we understand that ourselves?). Instead, children's books on war deal with its effects on society, on families, on individuals. One profoundly moving book is Roberto Innocenti and Christophe Gallaz's *Rose Blanche*, a story of a young German girl who discovers a Nazi concentration camp during World War II and, risking her own life, secretly brings food to the prisoners. The uncompromising ending in which the girl is killed during a battle is sensitively handled and, although very sad, is not without hope for a better world.

Toshi Maruki's *Hiroshima No Pika* (Boston: Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard, 1982) is a children's picture that describes the August morning in 1945 when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. The simple but frank descriptions from a little girl's point of view, illustrated by stark, expressionistic paintings, provide a moving portrayal of an event children should not have to experience. But children did experience that, and many more children today experience the tragedies of disease, war, starvation, and neglect. And this is why these books and others like them, despite their horrifying subjects, remain appropriate for children. If told with the proper sensitivity—common sense must always be our guide—these stories might encourage a more humane world in the future. It is never too early for children to learn empathy for others.

Bibliotherapy

Many of the books mentioned above are used for what is called *bibliotherapy*, which refers to the use of books, poetry, or other written material to address emotional or psychological issues. The term itself goes back to the 1930s, but the idea that reading books
can be part of the healing process for both mind and body is very old indeed. Above the entrance to the library at Thebes in ancient Greece was an inscription that announced: “A Healing Place for the Soul.”

For very young children, some of the most famous examples of books used for bibliotherapy are the Berenstain Bears books by Stan and Jan Berenstain. The characters are a typical family—mother, father, daughter, son—except, of course, they are bears. Each book addresses a very specific childhood experience and shows typical responses from both children and parents to these situations (The Berenstain Bears and the Bad Dream and The Berenstain Bears Go to the Doctor are two examples). The Berenstains, who began writing in the 1960s and whose work has been continued by their son Mike, have evolved with society, writing stories about children who are physically challenged and children who encounter drug dealers. As with most other didactic literature, the plots of these books are predictable and contrived, and the characters a bit flat, since all else is sacrificed for the lesson being taught.

However, life lessons can be found in books that simply tell good and wise stories, without resorting to didacticism. Ezra Jack Keats wrote and illustrated a series of books about Peter, a young boy growing up in the inner city and dealing with bullies (The Snowy Day), a new baby sister (Peter’s Chair), and a first “crush” on a girl (A Letter to Amy). Lucille Clifton wrote a series of picture books in poetry, describing the transitions in a young child’s life, including the death of a parent (Everett Anderson’s Goodbye), a mother’s new boyfriend (Everett Anderson’s 1, 2, 3), and, boldly, child abuse (One of the Problems of Everett Anderson)—all for children between the ages of about 4 and 6 years.

The problem with bibliotherapy is not whether it works—people have been assuaged and emboldened by books for centuries—but how it should be used. Do we wait until a grandparent dies to hunt down a children’s book on death? And does the book have to be specifically about the death of a grandparent to do any good? Do we wait until a crisis occurs before sharing books about broken families? And does the book’s crisis have to mirror our own? One librarian, Maeve Visser Knoth, has suggested that the best use of bibliotherapy is to encourage wide and deep reading that prepares children for life’s eventualities—rather than to scramble for the perfect antidotal book when a difficult occasion arises. She writes:

_I would rather inoculate children than treat the symptoms of the emotional trauma. We give children vaccinations against measles. We can't vaccinate against divorce, but we can give children some emotional knowledge to use when their families, or other families they know, do go through a divorce. I advocate that we read picture books about death and divorce and new babies when no one is dying, when a marriage is strong, before anyone is pregnant._ (273–274)

Reading is one of the most important ways we learn about life (our own experiences are rarely enough). When children read lots of good books, they learn about people and about their fears, their dreams, their failings, and their endurance; they learn how people cope with inevitable traumas of life. This is why it is vital that writers be honest in their
writing, that the human feelings they describe be genuine, and that the characters they
invent be emotionally real. It is also vital for children to read books that tell of life's sorrows
as well as of life's joys, that describe our human weaknesses as well as our strengths. That is
the best kind of bibliotherapy—the kind that prepares us for the curves life will surely
throw us.

Intellectual Freedom

Finally, we should say a word about censorship—the act of determining what is and what
is not objectionable for readers to read. Now it is true that parents act as censors when they
choose not to read a particular book with a young child; however, this is merely personal
preference. This sort of selection is different from some authority—political, social, or
religious—forbidding the public to read certain books, see certain films, and so on. That is
censorship.

In February 2007, a news item swept the nation when several librarians around the
country announced that they were going to remove Susan Patron's Newbery Award–
winning *The Higher Power of Lucky* from their libraries. And why? Because on the very first
page, the book's female protagonist, 10-year-old Lucky Trimble, overhears a character
describing a rattlesnake biting his dog on the “scrotum.” Because they thought that term
inappropriate in a book for 10-year-olds, or, more likely, they feared community backlash,
some nervous librarians took the book off the shelves. Never mind that the book is the
uplifting and beautifully told story of a young girl's finding her inner strength, her “higher
power.” We are reminded of that old saying about tossing out the baby with the bathwater.
Fortunately, most professionals take a more reasonable approach to these matters and
realize that attempts to shelter children from reality never work. Most feel it is better that
children learn about sensitive and controversial topics from responsible adults rather than
from their friends—or worse.

Censorship of children's books is rooted in society's desire to protect the “innocence”
of childhood. Its goal is to guard against elements deemed inappropriate for young
readers—harsh language, sexual innuendos, death and dying, violence, and “unapproved”
religious beliefs or philosophies. But who makes these judgments? The following books
have all been banned by some authority at one time or another: Mark Twain's *The
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, Maurice Sendak's *In
the Night Kitchen*, Shel Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic*, and all of J. K. Rowling's *Harry
Potter* books, to name just a few. Indeed, a list of the most frequently banned books almost
suggests that if a book has not been banned somewhere, it may not be any good at all.

In fact, censoring books almost always backfires. The quickest way to make a book
popular is to ban it. All this is not to say that some subjects demand more mental and
emotional maturity than others. It would be foolish to share a story about a teenage girl's
first menstrual cycle with a preschooler. On the other hand, many preschoolers have had to
deal with deaths in the family, child abuse, divorce, and other traumas. So, well-written books on these topics may fill an important need for these children. Common sense is every educator’s best asset. (See Figure 2.2 for a guide to combating censorship and preserving intellectual freedom in our schools.)

Perhaps most importantly, there is no real evidence that censorship protects anyone or makes society better. But there are plenty of examples throughout history of censorship being used to squelch ideas, to keep people enslaved, to stop progress. The purpose of a censor is to control ideas. And stopping the spread of new ideas is rarely good for a society. It is right that the fight against censorship is now usually referred to as the fight for intellectual freedom.

**FIGURE 2.2** A Brief Guide to Preserving Intellectual Freedom in the Classroom

1. **Know your rationale for using a book in the classroom.** Answer these questions:
   - Is the book appropriate for this age level?
   - Does the book meet your objectives in the class, and how?
   - Does the book appear on recommended lists, and what have been the reactions of critics?
   - What possible objections could be raised to the book—language, tone, theme, subject matter—and how can you best address these objections?
   - As a last resort, what alternative readings can you offer in place of this book?

2. **Have guidelines for handling community and parental objections.** Carefully organized procedures can do much to stem the tide of emotionalism. Include the following:
   - A complaint form on which specific objections are to be recorded
   - A clearly designated procedure for dealing with the complaint
   - A broad-based committee of teachers, administrators, and community representatives for hearing the complaints
   - A clear philosophical statement articulating the school’s educational principles

3. **Join with other teachers and the administration to protect students’ right to read (and the teachers’ right to teach).**

4. **Actively support other teachers when they encounter censorship challenges.**

5. **Educate the community about the importance of intellectual freedom.**
   - Write letters or articles for the local newspaper.
   - Lobby the school board members and other community leaders.
   - Conduct or sponsor community workshops on censorship.

6. **Keep informed about censorship issues through professional journals, reports, association meetings, and new media.**
Summary

Human development is a complex process that occurs on many different levels—physical, intellectual, and emotional. A child's developmental level directly impacts his or her response to reading. As adults, we often underestimate the abilities of small children—especially their linguistic abilities, including their ability to imitate sounds, put together sentences, and acquire new vocabulary. In their first 7 years, children go through developmental changes more rapidly than they will throughout the rest of their lives. Consequently, it is important to keep in mind the process of child development when we help them choose their books. A 1-year-old enjoys simple cloth picture books, but by age 7 many children are ready for chapter books. Of course, children develop at different rates, and we, as adults, are challenged to tune in to each child's needs and abilities. Fortunately, today we can find children's books to meet virtually every requirement and satisfy every desire.

We sometimes mistakenly believe that issues such as human sexuality, death, war, and violence are inappropriate subjects for children's books. But children are not immune to life's tragedies, and the many beautifully and sensitively written books on these topics can provide ways for children to cope and understand. And we might be wise to share some of these books during the normal course of events rather than wait until a crisis occurs. Reading should broaden a child's view of the world—not obscure it. And this is the best argument against any form of censorship.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Select a picture book for young children (such as one from the list at the end of Chapter 6) and analyze it from the standpoint of one or more of the development theories presented in the chapter. What age level does it seem to be addressing? What leads you to that conclusion? What specific issues of that age level does the book seem to be concerned with?

2. Locate and read two picture books on a similar theme—new babies (Ezra Jack Keats's Peter's Chair and Martha Alexander's Nobody Asked Me if I Wanted a Baby Sister), parental relationships (Margaret Wise Brown's Runaway Bunny and Jane Yolen's Owl Moon), or death and dying (Lucile Clifton's Everett Anderson's Goodbye and Tomie dePaola's Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs). What specific differences do you see in the way the writers and illustrators address the issue? Which, if either, is more effective? Why?

3. Locate three or four picture books that all focus on one social or personal issue (such as three or four books on human sexuality or on alternative family lifestyles.
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or on emotional or physical challenges). Determine the intended audience and note the publication date for each book. Now read the books carefully and evaluate them on their content and approach. Is the subject represented accurately and sensitively? What differences do you see in the treatment of the subject? Does one book stand out from the rest? Why?

4. Locate a children's picture book on a controversial issue (death, sex, war, violence, etc.) and read it carefully yourself. Then share it with several different people—children would be ideal, but you may also want to share it with some friends both male and female to get as many points of view as possible. What have you learned through this experience? Did your response to the book change over the course of the various readings? Explain.

Works Cited


Recommended Resources

• A good place to look for a list of recently censored books.


