

Writing *for* children

In the course of describing the kind of material that has been considered children's literature at different times and how this has changed, some characteristics associated with writing for children and young people have emerged; before going on to look at other developments in the field, it is worth looking at dominant tendencies in narratives for children and young people and how these relate to images of children, childhood, and adolescence.

Despite the vagaries around children's literature and its readers, over the years there has been quite a lot of agreement about what makes a text 'for children' at the levels of style and content. Having analysed the way a number of influential writers of classic children's fiction establish a relationship between narrators and readers, Barbara Wall (1991) concludes that the way adult writers address child readers is analogous to the way adults speak to children, and affects tone of voice, lexis, register, and the

amount of detail contained in descriptions and explanations. She identifies three modes typically used in writing for children. The first is double address in which narrators move between addressing child readers and the adults assumed to be reading with them or otherwise monitoring the reading process, often appearing to talk over the heads of the children and to collude with the adults. Single address exclusively addresses child reader while dual address succeeds in addressing both child and adult readers simultaneously and equally, resulting in a satisfying reading experience for both. Attending to Wall's categories of address can be useful in determining how far a book assumes a child readership, and helps to track changes in adult-child relationships in texts over time. As seen in some of the historical examples discussed above, early writing tended to use double address – to the point of including specific sections for adults. From the 20th century to the present, single address has tended to dominate writing for children who are reading books independently. Picture books, which are often read to children by an older person, often employ dual or double address, while dual address is a defining feature of crossover writing.

Address is not the only difference between writing for children and writing for adults. In a frequently quoted comparison of the two, Myles McDowell concludes that:

Children's books are usually shorter, they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism ... children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order; probability is often discarded; and one could go on endlessly talking of magic, fantasy, simplicity, and adventure.

Evidence that supports McDowell's summary has been provided by the Danish scholar Torben Weinreich (2000), who demonstrates that the process of adapting adult texts for children involves making them shorter, simpler, and often adding illustrations. Perry Nodelman concludes the first chapter of his detailed analysis of children's literature, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (2008), with a longer but substantially similar list to

McDowell's. As he goes on to say, however, it is important to distinguish between simple and simplistic writing, for many apparently simple children's books say thought-provoking things with elegant, sometimes deceptive, simplicity. For example, E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952) and Raymond Briggs's *The Man* (1992) engage subtly and philosophically with, among other issues, death and marginalization respectively (see [figure 13](#)). Nor are all children's books simply written: Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and His Child* (1967), William Mayne's *Cuddy* (1994) and Justine Larbalestier's *Liar* (2009) are stylistically demanding for readers of any age or level.

Until the late 20th century, there was an unwritten agreement that children's books would not include sex, bad language, or gratuitous violence, on the grounds that writing for children is part of the socializing process and so ought to set good examples and help readers learn approved ways of behaving that are likely to help them lead successful and fulfilling lives. Depressive endings too tended to be shunned, on the assumption that the young need to feel confident about the future and their ability to overcome obstacles. As ideas about childhood have changed, consensus over these attributes has largely broken down, particularly for the older readers who for most of its history were not considered as part of the intended audience for children's literature. Incorporating writing for teenagers challenged many long-held assumptions about children's literature; as a consequence, there are now many stylistically complex children's books that include sex, swearing, and random violence, and which end bleakly. As the age range catered for moves steadily upwards and crossover fiction becomes more common, the label 'children's literature' is increasingly problematic.

Contributing to problematising children's literature is the fact that new writing exists alongside the accumulated body of writing for young readers; for instance, many children's publishers have extensive backlists which often include 'classics' such as *The Children of the New Forest* (1847), *Little Women* (1868), *Pinocchio* (1883), and *The Secret Garden* (1911) written, when ideas of childhood were very different. The differences are not just about how children are understood; to modern eyes, the way many older works traditionally included in histories of children's books are written is often far from short, simple, active, and child-orientated. Obvious

examples are those books children annexed when there was little else for them to read—books such as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Gulliver's Travels*, or *Ivanhoe* (1819). Books that *were* written for children and were extremely popular with young readers in their day further complicate the picture. An example is Elizabeth Wetherell's, *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), a work of epic proportions and prodigious piety. The fact that today many of these works are read, if they are read at all, almost exclusively on university courses has opened up debate about whether it is still legitimate to regard them as children's literature.

On the other hand, attempts to ensure that texts for children are suitable on the grounds of simplicity of language and style have regularly foundered: what do you do, say, about Beatrix Potter's still much loved *Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) in which the sparrows *implore* Peter to *exert* himself after he is caught by his buttons in Mr McGregor's gooseberry net? (Some American educationalists have assessed the vocabulary in Potter's tale as appropriate for those from seventh grade to college.) Length is equally problematic; while many children's books today are shorter than those in the past, the popularity of the *Harry Potter* books, which regularly exceeded 400 pages (the final volume reached nearly 900), opened the door for many lengthy fantasy series for children.

Given the range of material classified as children's literature in histories of the subject, it is not surprising that it has proved impossible to come up with a coherent way of describing and delimiting it. Ultimately, many of those working in the field agree with John Rowe Townsend, children's author and critic, who in 1971 concluded that 'the only practical definition of a children's book today... is a book which appears on the children's list of a publisher'. This pragmatic approach works rather less well now that books may appear on both adult and children's lists – as have Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), Ian McEwan's *The Day Dreamer* (1994), most of the novels of Jane Gardam, and, of course, the crossover novels of J. K. Rowling, Philip Pullman, and Mark Haddon that have already been mentioned. It seems that if a definition for children's literature is to be found, it may depend less on the way a text is written and what it is about than on its relationship and construction of children and childhood. This is the conclusion reached by Perry Nodelman, who reminds us that

children and adults are different, and that just as children's needs need to be taken into account by doctors, psychologists, teachers, architects, and fashion designers, so they require different things in what they read. However, what children require is determined by adults on the basis of recollection, observation, interaction, and a pre-existing body of information, received opinion, and images about children and childhood.

The child in and outside the book

Even though the terms 'child', 'childhood', 'children', and 'adolescence' are regularly used in relation to children's literature, there is no monolithic version of any of these terms or a single vision of childhood behind children's literature. While the influence of Romanticism has had a profound and enduring influence on many aspects of childhood in narratives for children, and some sets of characteristics have tended to dominate (children as innocent, lovable, educable, civilizing), there are also child characters that are evil, brutish, savage, and irredeemable. Multiple sets of children and young people are implicated in every aspect of children's literature, from the child characters in the texts to the implied (but imaginary) child readers to actual child readers. While characters and implied readers may in some sense be fixed, actual readers are constantly changing so, when dealing with a book from the past, the term encompasses the original readers, those who are currently reading it, and all readers in between.

As already indicated, in the UK and the US the term 'children's literature' is now shorthand for writing directed at those from roughly 0 to 16 (that is, from birth to the age when a young person is legally able to leave school), but this varies from country to country and has also changed over time. These children come from many backgrounds, and both as members of groups and as individuals will have a range of needs, abilities, and experiences, so just as it was impossible to identify a single set of stable characteristics common to writing for children, so it is impossible to delimit the child in children's literature. Nevertheless, narratives for children

address and construct versions of childhood, and in doing so, they influence how children and childhood are understood, not least by the young. Central to this process is the fact that it is adults who create children's literature, and they do so according to their expectations of what childhood should be like. While these expectations can vary considerably from time to time, place to place, and person to person, the fact that the children in children's literature are adult creations has led Maria Nikolajeva (2009) to conclude that there is at least one constant in children's literature: what she calls 'aetonormativity', or the way adult norms have governed the patterns of children's literature, from its emergence to the present day. The power relation may be true, but adult norms are no more stable than those around childhood, so Nikolajeva's observation is more valuable for the sets of questions it engenders than as a defining feature of children's literature.

However it is defined, the rewards of studying writing for children, both as children's literature and as part of other specialist disciplines, are many. To demonstrate this claim, after a discussion of some of the approaches frequently used to study children's literature, the remaining chapters of this *Very Short Introduction* provide examples of areas where research in children's literature is opening up or extending academic debates.