

Introduction:

Matthew Arnold, A Teddy Bear, and a List of Touchstones

by Perry Nodelman

The best children's books are what we want; the best children's books will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining and delighting us, as nothing else can. A clearer, deeper sense of the best in children's books, and all of the strength and joy to be drawn from them, is the most precious benefit we can gather from a collection of essays such as the present.

Well, you say, maybe; perhaps I agree in principle—but why say it in such old-fashioned prose? In fact, neither the stately prose nor the ideas it expresses are my own; my first paragraph is an act of outright plagiarism. Replace the phrase “children's books” with the word “poetry,” the phrase “collection of essays” with “poetical collection,” and you have, almost word for word, part of the introduction that the English poet and essayist Matthew Arnold wrote in 1880 for an anthology of poems by T.H. Ward. That introduction, called “The Study of Poetry,” gives this book its title: for in it, Arnold put forth his famous proposition that great poetry might act as a touchstone.

Arnold used the word as a metaphor: the streaks left by gold or silver on touchstones, hard black stones like jasper or basalt, can be compared with the streaks left by alloys, in order to determine the quality of the metals. Arnold was thinking of that when he said,

Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we lodge them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry we may place beside them. (241-2)

Arnold's conception of touchstones may well have laid the foundation for literary study as we now know it. He voiced these ideas before English literature was a subject of formal study; and when that study developed late in the last century and early in this one, it was based in great part on Arnold's ideas. It continues to be so; teachers still select works of literature for study at least

partially in terms of the potential such works have to act as touchstones for students in their future reading, understanding and evaluation of literature.

Each of the essays in these volumes is an attempt to explain why a particular children's book might be considered a touchstone—a book beside which we may place other children's books in order to make judgments about their excellence.

The mere idea of such a collection of essays raises two obvious questions. First, why bother? Why does anybody need touchstones for children's literature? Second, even if we assume that such touchstones might be useful, who has the right to choose them? I can best answer the first question with some personal history; and since I was one of the group of people who had the undeniable arrogance to proclaim that these particular books are, indeed, *the* touchstones for children's literature, I must answer the second with a defense of that arrogance.

First, the history. When I began, more than a decade ago, to teach children's literature, I was already a university teacher of English literature, a specialist in Victorian poetry. I knew a lot about Matthew Arnold, and not much about children's books. But in the middle nineteen-seventies, hardly anybody wanted to learn about Victorian poetry; in those days, young men's fancies did not turn lightly or often to thoughts of Tennyson, and just about never to the best that has been known and thought in the world. Meanwhile, however, everybody wanted to study children's literature. Some wanted to so in order to turn their backs on the military-industrial complex and learn to be like innocent flowers again; some were actually having children, and feeling a responsibility to provide them with the correct books along with the correct educational toys, lest the deficiency of their primary years should later prevent them from getting into the right law schools; and some just wanted to land a job in the school system. But they all wanted to take courses in children's literature; so, like many university teachers of my time, I had to switch fields.

I had six months to work up a course; and the first thing I thought of was a teddy bear. I had the bear when I was young—not when I was two or three, mind you, but when I was twenty-two or three. I bought it during my first few weeks of graduate studies at a sophisticated Eastern university. Far away from my small undergraduate college in the midwestern boondocks, I was suddenly supposed to be sophisticated, and I did not feel very sophisticated; I bought the bear, I suspect, because I needed something of childhood still.

The bear sums up what children's literature meant to me, back then before I had seriously studied it. It represented an adult's nostalgia for an innocence he was supposed to have left behind; in fact, I justified my purchase of the bear by saying that it looked just like Winnie the Pooh, a character in a book I had just read for the first time, and enjoyed for its delightful evocation of the

carefree innocence of childhood. Books like *Winnie the Pooh* may have been intended to open the eyes of young readers to the ways of the world; I read them as momentary escapes, eye-closing experiences. In other words, I misunderstood utterly what such books might be for, or how they might best be read. And I was not untypical. Adults who enjoy children's books, and are even actually willing to teach courses about children's books, all too often tend to be dewy-eyed escapists, and their approach to children's literature tends all too often to be based in nostalgia.

Furthermore, my own nostalgia was fake—as such nostalgia often is. My bear evoked a past I never experienced. As a child, I had not had a stuffed bear, and I had not read *Pooh*. I can recall exactly one story and one poem from my early years. When I was ten, I went through all the Oz books in my community library; there were three. Then I discovered Thomas B. Costain and Perry Mason, and that was the end of my reading of children's books—at least until graduate school.

When I was asked to teach children's literature, therefore, I had no idea whatsoever about what books to teach, except for *Winnie the Pooh*. And the students who would enroll in a course in children's literature were not likely to be weary-minded literati in search of exquisite pseudo-nostalgia; I quickly realized that, during a horrific series of phone calls from students asking for permission to take my course without the required prerequisite, which was a course in English at the freshman level. When I asked these callers why they didn't have the prerequisite, their answer was always the same: "I love children, but I hate literature." I tried, as gently as I could, to suggest that it might not be wise of someone who didn't like literature to take a course in literature; but I did begin to wonder if there might be some way of identifying a good children's book that would be a practical guide for people who loved children—excellence in terms other than the interests of bear-owning adults.

Ten years ago, I didn't know if there was. But I quickly discovered that a lot of people thought they did know, and that those people had written books about it. And as an expert in literature and an ignoramus about children, I was thoroughly unsettled by these guides to children's literature.

My literary expertise had left me with the prejudice that a book could be considered good on the grounds of its literary merit. And literary merit, as I understood it then, depended exclusively on qualities like uniqueness and unity of vision, on subtle use of language and such. But while the guides I found myself reading did sometimes make grand statements about "depth of character" and "scintillating style," what they went into in great detail was something quite different.

Some of the guides told me how the good books were the ones that reinforced healthy attitudes; the healthier the attitudes, the better the book. Other guides told me that the good books were

the ones that children liked to read; the more children liked it, the better the book. But they all made judgments of excellence in terms of the effects of books on their audience—and that astonished me, for in the ivory tower of literary study I had hitherto inhabited, one certainly did not judge books by how they affected audiences; in fact, one often judged audiences by the extent to which they were affected by books, so that, for instance, anyone who wasn't overwhelmed by Shakespeare was simply assumed to be an intransigent dummy.

As I leafed through these various guides, I petulantly found myself wondering what I'd got myself into. I didn't know anything about what children liked or what was good for them, and I certainly didn't know what they might be capable of enjoying or learning from at various stages of their development: surely it was a course in literature I had agreed to teach, not one in child psychology. And in any case, I asked myself, in a fit of indignant anger at my own ignorance, how could the writers of these guides know what children like or need to learn? Who decides what children need to learn? I wanted to teach literary enjoyment, not how to propagandize for good values. And who says what children like to read? Some children, sure, but all of them? Always?

So I made what struck me as a courageous decision, and committed myself to my ignorance: I would stick with what I knew. My course would be about literature, not child psychology; and in choosing what to teach, I would dismiss all considerations of what children like or need. After all, I told myself, I didn't teach Tennyson's *Enoch Arden* instead of his *In Memoriam* just because more Victorians read and enjoyed *Enoch Arden*; *In Memoriam* was more interesting, more subtle—a better poem. And I didn't teach *In Memoriam* because I agreed with and wanted to inculcate in my students its distinctly peculiar vision of life; I taught it because I did find its vision of life peculiar, and therefore, interesting to talk about. I taught what struck me as being worth teaching, not what I thought would be fun for my students (few undergraduates get the giggles over *In Memoriam*), and not what I thought would be good for them (or at least, not good in any way but in the encouragement of their pleasure in good literature); I saw no reason why I should treat children's literature any differently.

Well, that was not quite the whole truth: one of the main reasons I taught *In Memoriam* was that I knew I was supposed to. Unlike *Enoch Arden*, *In Memoriam* appears in most textbooks of Victorian literature; I had first studied it myself in my undergraduate years, and articles about it appeared in scholarly journals far more frequently than did articles on *Enoch Arden*. Whether through wise conviction or lazy familiarity, specialists agreed that it was a poem teachers should teach and students should learn about.

But the only such agreement amongst specialists in children's literature seemed to be based on suppositions about the likes and needs of children—which I'd chosen to ignore. It was, I now realize,

foolish to have decided to ignore these important considerations; but in the long run, doing so has taught me much, including just why and how they are important. For without those convenient crutches, I was left to my own devices, and with a serious problem.

On the one hand, I wanted to teach children's books that I considered to be worthwhile as literature, in and for themselves, rather than for the effects I might imagine they would have on an audience of people quite unlike myself. On the other, I knew that good children's books were different from other kinds of worthwhile books—I couldn't simply choose good books by the criteria I might use for adult literature, and since I no longer felt any great fondness for that bear of my youth, I willingly acknowledged that it would be merely effete to choose children's books for bear-besotted adults. I needed a set of guidelines—or at least a list of books I might explore in order to develop my own guidelines.

Since there were no such guidelines, and no such list, I had to develop my own. Doing it was fun, for I soon discovered both an intense delight in children's literature, and an abiding intellectual fascination with it. A decade later, I've read enough children's books, and thought enough about those books, to know which ones I consider to be excellent or important—excellent in a way peculiar to children's books; important in the specific context of this unique kind of literature—and why.

Furthermore, I've learned enough about children's books to recognize the limitations of the ivory tower I once inhabited, and to have gained much respect for those who can speak with some confidence about what children need or like in literature. As I tried to understand what makes children's books unique, I had to confront the obvious fact that these books are different from other books simply because they are written for children. That meant I could not enter the tower, close the door, and forget about the audience; the ideas children's writers have about their audience have an immense effect on their books, and the relative lack of experience children have with literature has an immense effect on how they read those books. By coming to understand something of the relationships between children and literature, I've come to realize the extent to which *all* literature must be understood and judged in terms of its effects on readers, real or imagined. I still distrust generalizations about what children, or any readers, like or need—but I know now how important it is for us to investigate and consider these areas.

I don't yet understand what children's literature is all about; I expect I never will for sure, although I am immodest enough to continually believe that I am continually getting closer. But this I do know: the more I think about what excellence in children's literature consists of, the more I admire, the more complex I find, and the more intensely I understand the same small number of books. Those books are my own eternally useful touchstones.

Having those touchstones, I can now do what I could not do a

decade ago: I can think about children's literature in the same way I think about Tennyson or Arnold. I can transcend both pseudo-nostalgia and child psychology. I can work at trying to understand what it is about my touchstones that makes them excellent or important, I can think about the books I admire in order to understand why they might be admirable, what they might have in common with each other, why they are indeed excellent children's books. And in doing that, I can keep getting closer to an understanding of what is special about children's literature, for the peculiar usefulness of touchstones resides in their paradoxical nature: they are the most distinguished books, and so they best represent the distinguishing characteristics of the genre they belong to. We not only believe that *In Memoriam* is a great poem, and therefore unique; we also see it as a particularly clear example of what Victorian poetry is all about.

I had to find my own touchstones; so did others. My personal voyage from fake nostalgia for a stuffed bear to real admiration for books like *Winnie the Pooh* stands as an example, and explains why this book came into existence. Those others, many of them English teachers like myself, but many others educators and librarians with a taste for literary pleasures, were separately coming to realize that the conventional approaches to children's literature, while useful and necessary, were simply not literary enough in focus to answer the sorts of questions that a literary education had trained them to ask, that they enjoyed asking, and that they believed to be important.

Fortunately, we were also finding each other. The annual conferences of the newly-formed Children's Literature Association were offering a forum for new ideas; so were journals like *Children's Literature* and *Children's Literature in Education*, and soon, the Children's Literature Association's own *Quarterly*. And the more we talked with each other, the more we realized our desire for what people interested in other sorts of literature could simply take for granted: a set of touchstones, a list of works everybody agreed were the important ones.

Without that, there was really no such thing as "children's literature" that could be discussed by a sizeable number of people, simply because there was no agreement about what children's literature could safely be assumed to consist of, and above all, about what especially mattered in it—what most needed to be discussed and studied and understood. There were no *In Memoriams* to admire or to react violently against admiration of, only many different people with many different ideas about what the *In Memoriams* of children's literature might be. Children's literature studies would remain chaotic until such a shared context could be developed.

But even a decade ago, there were the beginnings of agreement about which children's books might be considered touchstones. The writers of the existing guidebooks did mention the same books again and again; while they usually claimed to be choosing books

that children liked or needed, they were making their choices from what was clearly a pre-established pool of books, books that already seemed to be considered noteworthy without any reference to likes and needs. For instance, many of them talked about how children would like *Peter Rabbit* and what they would learn from it, but few talked about how children would like or learn from Potter's similar *Jeremy Fisher*. Furthermore, certain books were frequently the subjects of papers at conferences and articles in journals; certain others were not, so that discussing them seemed to require some particular justification. In other words, there were touchstones, but nobody had yet taken the trouble to identify them.

In 1980, readers of the *ChLA Quarterly* were asked to name those books they considered to be most significant in a variety of categories. Those who responded were surprisingly unanimous in their choices—so unanimous that some people criticized the use of space to belabor the obvious. At about the same time, the board of the Children's Literature Association appointed a committee to develop a "canon"—a list of important children's books.

It was that committee—the ChLA Canon Committee—that had the arrogance to name these touchstones. The most arrogant thing about it was its name, for despite the fact that teachers of literature use "canon" to refer merely to the literature usually studied in English courses, the word has unfortunate implications of restrictiveness, of laying down the law. As a member of the committee, I can guarantee that it never could have legislated anything. This is not to say that individual members of the committee would not have liked to have had their own preferences declared to be the right ones and imposed on the world at large; we are, after all, merely human, and humanly in love without our own opinions. Exactly because we are merely human, though, we needed to argue with each other; we needed to be a committee so that we could sift out what in our ideas about the important children's books was shared, and what merely personal.

The committee considered a number of possible "canons." At one point, we prepared a list of hundreds and hundreds of "good" books—an interesting guide to a lifetime of reading, but, we soon realized, far too general, far too broad in its definition of value, to serve any more particular purpose. A list that might actually help to define excellence had to separate the good from the likeable, and the great from the good; we found ourselves eliminating three particular kinds of books. The first were undeniably worthwhile, but widely unread, the second widely popular but not particularly worthwhile; in other words, we realized that we were looking for books that combined distinctiveness with popularity, and that neither alone would do. The third category was the largest and the least easy to deal with: those books that were undeniably excellent, and were also widely read, but that were not, for want of a better word, important—books that had elicited admiration but not much discussion.

In considering such books, we realized what were looking for: touchstones, books that are paradoxically both the most unconventional and the most representative of conventions. The history of any art is always the history of the innovations that worked—the Beethoven symphonies and Picasso paintings that challenged the old conventions and then became the basis of the new conventions. A touchstone has to be unconventional enough to draw attention to itself, to cause controversy, perhaps to encourage imitators; it cannot be merely another excellent book of a conventional sort, another good historical novel, another fine fantasy, another excellent picture book.

The committee finally did its work by refusing to indulge in the usual behavior of committees—there was no negotiating, and finally, no compromise. We were looking for touchstones—books everyone agreed were significant; we decided that the best way to know that would be to discover what we all could agree on. So we sat down together in a room, and went through a long list of possibilities; we agreed to include on our list only those books everybody in that room felt should be included, and we promised each other that we would not leave the room until we came up with a final list. We were surprisingly unanimous. The ChLA list of touchstones is not long— but it does represent the agreement of a highly diverse group of librarians, educators, and English teachers about which children's books have both merit and significance.

The list has faults. The books are mainly American or British, and most were written in the last hundred or so years; our ideas about significance are unfortunately parochial. While the list rightly includes children's versions of significant landmarks of our culture, such as the Greek and Norse myths, there is no mention of the most significant and influential of such works: the Bible. In ignoring the achievement of a brilliant practitioner of the difficult art of writing "simple" picture book texts like Margaret Wise Brown, the list represents the prejudice of English scholars for complexity; indeed, one frequent criticism has been the inclusion of long novels and short picture books on an equal basis, a criticism based on what surely must be two wrong assumptions—that it somehow takes more genius to write a good long story than a good short one, and that words are somehow more important than pictures. The list tends to mistrust exuberance and energy; an example is the choice of the wacky but relatively calm *Five Hundred Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* to represent the works of the often anarchic Dr. Seuss. The list implies that there is no possibility for excellence outside the confines of linguistic distinction, and so eliminates innovative and popular but stylistically undistinguished writers like Frank L. Baum and Beverly Cleary—just as criticism of adult literature tends to downplay the works of writers like Theodore Dreiser. Indeed, the list ignores some of the most popular and influential of writers for children for no clear reason (except, perhaps, the committee's distaste for them); it

might be argued the James Barrie's *Peter Pan* was a play before it was a novel, and the Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* is too bland in characterization and style to be a touchstone; but both these books have been widely popular, both have had hundreds of imitators, and both have excited such vast amounts of critical discussion that their significance can hardly be denied. Finally, the list's clear preference for realistic styles of art downplays the entire history of often excellent cartooning that has been the mainstay of illustration for children.

That's a lot of objections. Yet I'm proud to have been a member of the committee that produced the list, for I believe its deficiencies are not specifically those of that committee. I believe that it does, in fact, quite accurately represent a current consensus amongst literary specialists of what constitutes excellence and importance in children's literature. In doing so, it reveals the limitations of that consensus—and that may well be its main usefulness. In revealing what we believe to be significant, the list allows us to explore both the strengths and the weaknesses in our understanding of significance.

As it happens, the decade in which teachers of literature began to be interested in children's books was a time of great ferment in North American intellectual life, a time in which many traditional ideas were being questioned; and while teachers of children's literature were confronting the chaos of life without a "canon," other literary experts were envisaging the freedom of life without one. Their reasons for doing so throw some light on the deficiencies of the ChLA list of touchstones, and I hope, show why a deficient list is infinitely better than no list at all.

In recent decades, many academics have come to believe that all definitions of excellence are elitist: attempts by one segment of humanity to impose its tastes on others with less power. The traditional body of literature that is thought to be worth studying contains relatively little written by women and almost nothing by blacks—little by anybody other than white males of a certain class and background. Interestingly, too, it includes only one book written for children, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*—and the critics of adult literature who take *Alice* seriously make it quite clear that they do not consider it to be a book for mere, insignificant youngsters, for if it were, they certainly would not be wasting their important time on it. So it may be that *Alice*, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, are considered touchstones because they accord with the tastes and further the interests of those who already have power: educated, relatively wealthy, male or male-dominated members of the establishment. Perhaps the "bad" taste it takes to enjoy a less intellectually stimulating work of children's literature than *Alice* or a poem by Tennyson like *Enoch Arden* is merely popular taste, and academic dismissal of it merely a potent weapon in class warfare.

Similarly, then, naming touchstones of children's literature can

be seen as an attempt to impose the tastes of a small group upon the rest of humanity—the list must inevitably include only those books that educated members of the establishment prefer, books that inevitably support the values of educated members of the establishment; and it would ignore books that might satisfy the tastes or further the interests of less powerful segments of society—in particular, children.

A quick glance through the ChLA list reveals the justice of that criticism. The books almost exclusively represent the European traditions of most well-off North Americans. These myths and legends and poems and novels are the literary equipment of well-educated people, people destined for economic and social success—and so are the values they express. Taken as a whole, in fact, these books are rather singlemindedly concerned with the joys of acceptance of one's lot—with coming to an accommodation with what already is.

But reading these books in terms of their apparently conservative conclusions is to miss half the point. A surprising number of them qualify their message of acceptance with a celebration of childlike freedom and independence—even anarchy. Indeed, one of the reasons these books are touchstones is that they are not merely propaganda: they are mysterious enough, subtle enough, rich enough, that there is almost always another way of reading them, another qualification of the values they seem to proclaim.

Yet in the context of children's books, even the praise of youthful anarchy is an adult value—even radical leftist literature for children tries to make young readers into good radical leftists. Children's books, which are always written by adults for children, always proclaim adult values; while adults can hardly be faulted for wanting to teach children what it cost them much pain to find out for themselves, the adult message to children is always conservative. This book about touchstones of children's literature will serve an important purpose if it does nothing more than make that obvious—and so, perhaps, encourage we adults to practise our inevitable manipulation of children with some sense of the potential danger in what we are doing, and with some humility.

For we *must* "manipulate" children—or, to use a more positive word, to educate them. Should we choose to respect their individuality by refusing to manipulate them, by refusing, thus, to teach them our own values, we would have to give up, not just choosing touchstones, but also, writing books for children altogether. And we would leave them with nothing but the values they already have—the values of lack of education, and lack of experience. To assume that those values are less enriching and less useful than those of educated, experienced people like ourselves may be arrogant; but to assume otherwise is merely anarchic.

Furthermore, the form of manipulation implied by the concept of touchstones is decidedly unmanipulative—even anti-manipulative. The ChLA list does not proclaim subjective taste; it merely

describes communal values. Because the values are not just subjective, they are discussable. Because they can be discussed, they can, indeed they must, be explored and explained; and because they can be explained, the explanation can be disagreed with—provided that those who disagree are willing to offer explanations for their disagreement. The willingness to disagree, and to enjoy the discussion of what one disagrees about, is the basic assumption, the humble motivation behind the apparent arrogance of our publically proclaiming what we acknowledge to be a deficient list of touchstones. We don't want to proclaim the law: we want to open a dialogue.

The book is part of that dialogue; and it shows that touchstones, far from being sacrosanct and unquestionable, do indeed offer much to think about, much to disagree about. Rather than take excellence and literary significance for granted, these essays explore those concepts. Each contributor was asked to write about how or why the work in question might be considered a touchstone; the answers are as various as the works, and together, they constitute an investigation of value in literature in general, and in children's literature in particular.

These volumes should most interest literary specialists and others professionally involved with children's literature; but I hope they will also give teachers, parents, and librarians much to think about as they introduce children to books. We certainly don't intend that children should read *only* these touchstone works; indeed, their doing so would deny the purpose of touchstones, which is to offer guidance in the reading, understanding, and evaluation of all sorts of literature. Our naming and exploration of touchstones will have best served their purpose if adults see the virtue of giving children access to these touchstones *along* with other books, many other books, books of all kinds and of all degrees of quality—books that might be compared with the touchstones.

These essays will have served their purpose even better if they encourage adults to talk about literary excellence *with* children. Children have as much need for literary touchstones and for a way of discussing the pleasures offered them by literature as do literary critics. Above all, they need a way out of the prison of their own immature tastes and into a dialogue with the tastes of others; fortunately, the way implied by the existence of this book can be learned, and should be taught. The teaching of it may be manipulative, the imposition of adult patterns of thought on children; but once learned, this particular form of thoughtfulness, of exploration and explanation, can be a strong defense against other more dangerous attempts at manipulation. Propaganda only works on those who don't know how to think about it.

My ideas about children's literature are vastly different now than they were a decade ago. They have been changed by my wide reading in children's literature, which has shown me the limitations of my former pseudo-nostalgia; they have been changed even more by

my own three children, who, in being triumphantly and unfailingly unpredictable, have confirmed my old prejudice that no wise adult should ever presume to guess what children might like or actually do need—and also, taught me by their unpredictable responses the immense significance of such responses in understanding literature. I value different children's books than I once did, and for different reasons.

But I still have that stuffed bear. Or rather, I still live in the same house with it, for it has finally fulfilled the purpose for which it was intended: my children play with it. It takes its place in games that also involve Care Bears and Barbies. I'm glad to see it there, surrounded by commercialized horrors that I tolerate only by allowing my good sense as a parent to triumph over my outraged sensibilities. I'm glad to see it there because I think it is an excellent toy. The bear isn't desirable. It isn't "child-like," carefully designed to give children what adults think they want; it looks a lot like real bears look. But while it's very much a bear, it doesn't come encumbered by all sorts of pre-packaged ideas about how to play with it; the children can develop their own fantasies and games about it. It isn't obsessively trying to teach anything. In fact, that bear is something of a touchstone for me, a toy by which other toys might be measured. And after all, books are just another sort of toy—a means of exploring the imaginative playfulness that makes us human. I guess that bear still represents my ideas about children's literature.

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