

## special section

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“What is the use of repeating all that stuff,” the Mock Turtle interrupted, “if you don’t explain it as you go on?”

From Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Drawn by Arthur Rackham (William Heinemann Ltd, 1907).

### The Art of the Children’s Novel

As I write, a dummy copy of Volume One of *Touchstones: Reflections on the Best in Children’s Literature* sits on my desk beside me; by the time you read these words, copies of the actual book should be available to you. In it, there are twenty-eight essays, each a discussion of why one of twenty-eight children’s novels might be considered a touchstone of children’s literature. In the months to come, Volume Two of this series will appear; it contains twenty essays on myths, legends, collections of fairy tales, and poetry for children. Finally, a third volume containing essays about illustrators and picture books should be out within the year.

As editor of this massive project, I have lived with it for far too long; at one point, my wife threatened to name it as correspondent in a divorce suit. So I am delighted and relieved to have my dummy of Volume One to hold and to look at, as tangible evidence of my own work and that of many others. But because I have already read and edited the essays for these volumes, I’ve known for many months that the *Touchstones* series has indeed turned out to be a worthwhile project: as I had hoped when I first proposed it, it has led some thoughtful and knowledgeable readers to think deeply and well, not just about the specific books named as touchstones, but about the whole subject of excellence in children’s literature.

I’m delighted that has happened simply because it confirms my faith that one of our most serious obligations to ourselves and to children is to consider carefully, not just what books we think are the best ones, but also, what our choices imply about our ideas of excellence. Knowing what we value and why we value it is inevitably humbling: for thinking about such matters quickly forces anyone who is not irredeemably dogmatic to acknowledge that no definition of value can be absolute—that all of our ideas of excellence are inextricably tied up with our personal, our social, our cultural assumptions. In other words, thinking about what we admire forces us to think about the often unconscious (and therefore potentially dangerous) prejudices upon which our ideas of excellence are based. It might even force us to value different things, for better and more clearly understood reasons. And since our thinking about children’s literature has an immediate effect on what and why children read, it is doubly significant.

But thinking about the literature we value may not just be good for us, and therefore, for the children who will be influenced by our attitudes: it might even be a condition for the survival of literature itself. In a fine little book called *Forms of Attention* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), Frank Kermode baldly asserts that

“opinion is the great canon-maker” (74)—that works of art come to be considered important not because of some shared inherent quality in them, but because they happen to seem valuable in terms of current taste and opinion. Kermode successfully makes that point by showing how Botticelli, whose work was ignored for centuries, came to be considered a great artist in the last century, as new ideas about art—new ways of paying attention to it—made what was once distasteful or even meaningless seem profound and important. Kermode’s point here is not that all opinions about value are suspect because none is absolute or immutable; instead, he wants to show how it is actually changing opinions about their value that keeps significant works of literature alive—that even keeps literature as a whole alive.

Kermode believes that what the works of art we consider important share is the ability to engender many different sorts of opinions about themselves: such works “share with the sacred at least this quality: that however a particular epoch or a particular community may define a proper mode of attention or a licit area of interest, there will always be something else and something different to say” (62). These different forms of attention are always doomed to error, always likely to be superseded; but paradoxically, that is why they are so important:

The success of an interpretive argument as a means of conferring or endorsing value is . . . not to be measured by the survival of the comment but by the survival of its object. Of course, an interpretation may live on in the tradition on which later comment is formed, either by acceptance or reaction; but its primary purpose is to provide the medium in which its object survives. (67)

A great work survives by always engendering new interpretations simply because the mere fact that those interpretations exist makes it seem beyond the grasp of any one interpretation: “To be inside the canon is to be protected from wear and tear, to be credited with indefinitely large numbers of possible internal relations and secrets, to be treated as a heterocosm, a miniature Torah. It is to acquire magical and occult properties. . . .” (90).

Kermode is unclear about whether it is actually a quality of such works that they allow endless interpretation, or whether any work, once considered canonical, would inevitably engender endless interpretations. What is clear, however, is that that ability of just one work of literature to engender an apparently infinite number of responses is indeed magical. And that magic—the fact that we can all read interesting books differently, that we can enter into conversations with each other about the differences between our various forms of attention to them, and between all of our interpretations and the book itself—is surely one of the main pleasures of literature. Great books both speak to us and hold something back, both convey profound meaning and imply something more, something we believe we might understand if we think some more and talk some more about it. That paradoxical ability to both communicate and forever remain mysterious is surely what keeps us interested in literature; and in being interested in it, we

have no choice but to be interested in ourselves, and in the mystery of what we are or might be.

So it is our continuing and continually different conversation about what books are part of the canon—about which ones are great and about why they might be considered great—that keeps literature alive:

In thinking about canonicity in the history of the arts and literature, we have at once to reflect that our canons have never been impermeable; that our defenses of them are always more provisional than a church’s would be; that we therefore have the advantage of being able to preserve the modernity of our choices without surrendering the right to add to them, even to exclude members of them, not by means of difficult administrative procedures but simply by continuing a conversation. (79)

I believe the *Touchstones* volumes represent that sort of canon in the area of children’s literature: they assert that some books are widely considered to be especially significant ones, and provide a variety of forms of attention to them. These volumes are part of what I sincerely hope and firmly expect to be a continuing conversation about them. Much of it is very good conversation indeed.

Furthermore, because they are conversation and not a statement of dogma, the *Touchstones* volumes do leave much more to be said. This issue of the *Quarterly* continues the conversation by providing different forms of attention to some of the same books, and more conventional forms of attention to some different books. Five of the articles “preserve the modernity” of some already singled-out children’s novels by finding something new and important to say about them; *Charlotte’s Web*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Alice in Wonderland* (in comparison with an inferior adaptation) are confirmed as touchstones by the mere fact that five sensitive readers should have found such new and different ways of paying attention to them—and that three of them should have found three different ways to pay attention to the same one book. Meanwhile, the work of opinion in changing the canon goes on in other articles about books whose significance is less certain. The authors of articles on Tournier’s *Friday and Robinson*, Hoban’s *The Mouse and his Child*, Bond’s *A String in the Harp*, Cooper’s *Dark is Rising* series, and Hamilton’s *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* understand and announce the non-canonical status of the books they discuss; four of them offer interpretations that suggest why the books they discuss should be the subject of more conversation, and the fifth offers a sound argument for the exclusion of its subject from the canon.

All of these articles, and all the others in this issue, were submitted to the *Quarterly* in response to our open invitation to anyone to submit essays on any aspect of children’s literature any time; for the first time in the history of this journal, we did not especially commission any of the articles. Our decision to depend less on commissioned articles from established critics who could be trusted to be stimulating was something of a gamble; so I’m delighted that it has paid off, in articles that not only represent at least our usual standard of writing and

critical thinking, but that are also, in most cases, by authors whose work appears in the *Quarterly* for the first time, and who, being different people, inevitably pay different sorts of attention to literature. The conversation about children's literature continues in the *Quarterly*, and it does so with more participants than ever. The result can only be our deepening awareness and enjoyment of the magic of good children's books.

At its meeting in November, the Board of the Children's Literature Association approved the appointment of Roderick McGillis of the University of Calgary as my successor; Rod becomes Associate Editor of the *Quarterly* immediately, and Editor as of the beginning of 1988. Academic deadlines being what they are, Rod has already begun to make plans for the 1988 issues; anyone with ideas for special topics, new columns, or what have you, should pass them on to him. I retain responsibility for all issues of the *Quarterly* prior to 1988, and I'm still in the market for articles for this year's and

next year's issues. Send all submissions to me; I promise to pass anything not accepted for publication in 1986 and 1987 on to Rod for further consideration.

I note with regret the death of Carol Gay in December of last year. Carol's fine article on *Anne of Green Gables* appears in this issue. She was to be guest editor of the Fall, 1987 *Quarterly*, devoted to teaching children's literature both to university students and to children; that issue will be a memorial tribute to her—her work for the ChLA in various capacities, especially as ChLA Historian, and most suitably, in the light of the topic, to her reputation as a fine teacher at Youngstown University. Carol's husband Tom Gay has agreed to take over both her job as Historian and responsibility for the *Quarterly* issue; contributors may send submissions to him at the English Department, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio, USA 44555.

Perry Nodelman

## The Real Miracle of *Charlotte's Web*

by Norton D. Kinghorn

From the time of its first appearance in 1952, reviewers and critics have heralded E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* as a children's classic, but they differ widely on the question of what it is about. Taking his cue from a chance remark of White's (*Letters* 481), Roger Sale believes the book is a "hymn to the barn"—a hymn of "celebration and praise" of the life that begins and ends there (258). In a 1952 review Eudora Welty suggested that the book was about "friendship on earth, affection and protection, adventure and miracle, life and death, trust and treachery, pleasure and pain, and the passing of time" (49); many others have seen friendship as the main theme. But to John Rowe Townsend, the animals in the barn are really people, through whom E. B. White teaches us about ourselves, some of us loyal and intelligent (like Charlotte), other poor, fat, and unheroic (like Wilbur), still others greedy and self-seeking (like Templeton)(241).

On the question of who the book is about, there is even less agreement. At least one reviewer thought Fern was the protagonist, and John Rowe Townsend finds Fern central to the meaning of the novel:

The death of Charlotte . . . is the death of a person, made bearable by the continuance of life through her offspring. The barn and farmyard are a world. The passage of seasons, the round of nature, are unobtrusively indicated.

Outside the life of the farmyard there is another world, not perhaps more real but on a different plane, which is that of commonplace human life; and perhaps the most poignant thing in the book is the passage of small girl Fern from involvement with the animals as people to a perfectly normal, but imaginatively regressive, preoccupation with the glittering actualities of the fairground. Fern has begun the saving of Wilbur, but by the end she has forgotten him; that is life, too. Childhood passes (241-42).

But while *Charlotte's Web* is about Fern, there is probably not a case for Fern as the protagonist of the story, for, as Rebecca Lukens maintains (17, 66), Fern's character is left quite flat and undeveloped. After the beginning, when she saves the runt pig with her child's argument for justice, Fern soon becomes unobtrusive in the story of Wilbur and Charlotte and the barn, almost invisible, to become visible only occasionally to remind us that the story is, after all, partly hers, and to represent the evolution of the species human beings. White spent two years in the research for and composition of *Charlotte's Web*, and then, sensing that the book was not quite right, put it aside for a year. When he returned to the story, he rewrote it completely, primarily to add Fern—a change that he later believed "a lucky move . . . a narrow squeak" (*Letters* 644, 649). Fern is important in White's tale in the way that Gatsby is important in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, or that Willie Stark is important in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, or Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. She is not the protagonist of the story, but the point cannot be made without her.

Rebecca Lukens identifies Wilbur as the sole protagonist of the story, for Wilbur's character develops, Wilbur changes (17, 66). But if the story were essentially about Wilbur, White might have called the book "Forever Wilbur" or "Wilbur and the Web" or "Just Plain Wilbur" or "The Oink of the Pig." He didn't. Instead, his title highlights another character and her creation—Charlotte A. Cavatica and her web. White himself, with characteristic economy, says that "the theme of 'Charlotte's Web' is that a pig shall be saved," and then proceeds in praise of spiders:

"As for Charlotte herself, I had never paid much attention to spiders until a few years ago. Once you begin watching spiders, you haven't time for much else—the world is really loaded with them. I do not find them repulsive or revolting, any more than I find