

"Children's Literature: 1900 to the Present." The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States, ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin. New York: Oxford, 1994. 180-182

1900 to the Present

Written, marketed, and most often purchased by people well past childhood, children's books represent adult fantasies about being young more than they reflect the experiences of children. Nevertheless, children often accept what their teachers and parents want them to believe: that they are or ought to be like the imaginary children in the books they read.

Furthermore, because of traditional assumptions about women's primary responsibility for children, most of the American adults who have been attracted to the business of writing, editing, selling, reviewing, and buying children's books throughout this century have been women. Consequently, the powerful images of childhood in children's books have most often been products of women's imaginations, and represent women's desire.

The fantasy children of American children's books come in three main types. The first is blissfully innocent, the second, dangerously ignorant. The third is an attempt to balance the other two. Not surprisingly, most representatives of the first type are male children, imagined by male authors. Understood as faith in one's power to be and to do whatever one likes, innocence is hard to distinguish from the American ideal of manhood. But the American ideal of womanhood has traditionally tempered that democratic ideal with a more gender-specific need for responsibility to others; and most of the books of the second type, from Sunday school parables of earlier decades to contemporary fables encouraging nonsexism and ecological correctness, have been produced by women.

These didactic books, by far the largest proportion of the literature produced for children in this century, always preach some version of the same message: the necessary limits of desire, the extent to which the delights of innocence might also be the dangers of ignorance. While the implied audience for that idea is usually children in general, the message resonates most profoundly in terms of our expectations

for girls. But that doesn't mean there have been no utopian visions of innocent desire triumphant for girls.

At the beginning of the century, alongside popular adventure series about all-conquering males like the Outdoor Chums, the Khaki Boys, the Auto Boys, and the Hardy Boys were others about all-conquering females like the Girl Aviators, the Adventure Girls, the Khaki Girls, and the Motor Girls. While the authors' names on these books' covers were female, the texts of these volumes were often turned out by anonymous writers working from plot outlines. We can't know if they actually represent female desire. Nevertheless, Harriet Adams, daughter of the mass-market entrepreneur Edward Stratemeyer, claimed late in life to have been the Carolyn Keene credited with Stratemeyer's Nancy Drew series; and as the continuing popularity of Nancy Drew, who first appeared in 1930, reveals, these books do represent one version of desirable femininity.

Clever and attractive, Nancy solves crimes without musing her stylish outfits or evoking anything but unqualified adoration from everyone she meets. The evildoers, meanwhile, tend to be disturbingly hairy males who speak in foreign and lower-class accents—nightmarish figures girls might desire and ought to fear.

The many books for girls about boys also offer both fulfillment of readers' utopian desires for self-indulgent triumph—in this case, romantic triumph—and messages about the dangers of desire. Maureen Daley's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) celebrates almost the same version of male-besotted female adolescence that informs the widely read "teen romances" produced decades later, in the 1980s, in series like *Sweet Valley High* (created by Francine Pascal). In both cases, love, here defined as the wish to submit passively to the implacable male desire one has aroused, becomes acceptable only when its object is a safely "nice" boy, instead of a disturbingly exciting one from a different class or culture.

If romance fiction represents the accommodation of desire to social pragmatism, the novels produced for older children from the 1960s through the 1980s and identified as representing a "new realism" perform the opposite trick: they represent the accommodation of reality to the utopian desires of innocence. Each of the protagonists of these books faces just one real psychological or social problem: the onset of menstruation (Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, 1970; obesity (E. M. Kerr's *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*, 1972); a growing awareness of one's homosexuality (Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind*, 1982). But while the novels offer practical advice, they are

also classic wish-fulfillment stories: underdog children triumph over uncomprehending or repressive parents. Furthermore, they all offer the same solution to their various problems—a theoretically educational message that confirms a desire-requiring self-indulgence: to grow is to accept yourself as you already are.

Anne M. Martin's *Babysitter's Club* series, the best-selling children's books of the 1990s, if not of the century, also confirms self-acceptance as the correct response to just about any problem imaginable, from romance to cancer. But in these cynical times, psychological growth pales in comparison to what *really* matters: getting ahead in business. In their blissfully unflinching financial acumen, the *Babysitters* not only satisfy an intensely contemporary form of desire, they also represent role models for young entrepreneurs-in-the-making.

This combination of wish-fulfillment and business advice is merely the latest version of the most enduring characteristic of American women's writing for children. Boys in children's books by men often have adventures without learning anything but the rightness of their self-confidence; but in Nancy Drew and the *Babysitters*, in even the most utopian visions of female desire fulfilled, there is almost always a message. And more often than not, the message qualifies the desirability of desire fulfilled: even the cash-crazy *Babysitters* pay lip service to the idea that money can't buy happiness. As a result, the fantasy children in children's books by women almost all represent the third type outlined earlier: attempts to balance desire and didacticism.

The most characteristic stance of books written across the decades and for children of all ages is a nostalgia for that which the author nevertheless finds lacking—a celebration of the joys of childhood qualified by an insistence on the limitations of childlike perception. Thus, children's poets like Eve Merriam, Kaye Starbird, Myra Cohn Livingston, and Karla Kuskin often ask readers both to enjoy and see beyond the limitations of the childlike voices they evoke. The texts of picture books intended for the youngest audiences—from classics like Wanda Gag's *Millions of Cats* (1928), Margery Flack's *Story about Ping* (1933), Virginia Lee Burton's *Little House* (1942), and Margaret Wise Brown's *Runaway Bunny* (1942), through more contemporary tales like Judith Viorst's *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (1972) and Ann Jonas's *The Quilt* (1984)—describe comfortingly cozy worlds in pleasurable rhythms; but they all imply or assert the danger of the childlike desires of innocent people, animals, or objects.

So do many novels. In the early years of

the twentieth century, the qualified nostalgia emanated from books about deliciously ingenuous heroines: Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1904), Gene Stratton Porter's *Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), Eleanor Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913). While the innocent optimism of these girls delights everyone they meet, they must also learn the limitations of imaginative freedom: it can transform the world, but only when what they want to transform it into is a conservative idyll of domestic bliss.

A focus on the limitations of innocence continues in the most characteristic form of American women's writing for children through the decades—the nostalgic family story. Eleanor Estes's *The Moffats* (1941), Elizabeth Enright's *The Saturdays* (1941), Beverly Cleary's *Henry Huggins* (1950) and *Ramona and Her Father* (1979), E. L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (1967), Ilse-Margaret Vogel's *My Twin Sister Erica* (1976) and *My Summer Brother* (1981)—all focus on young children making foolishly ignorant but endearingly innocent mistakes. While the children claim to learn from their errors, they usually manage to be innocent again in the next episode.

The conflict between pleasure in childhood innocence and the didactic urge to end it is characteristic of American women's writing for children because it is characteristic of American mothering. As *advice manuals have insisted throughout the century, mothers must both love children as they are and work constantly to change them into something better. Novels by women that focus on male children are particularly intense expressions of maternalism. They often work to undermine conventional images of machismo by celebrating boys who are less the dangerous males women supposedly find sexually attractive than the docile ones they would actually like to mother.

Novels as different as Paula Fox's nostalgic *One-Eyed Cat* (1984), Katherine Paterson's realistic *Come Sing, Jimmy Jo* (1985), and Madeleine L'Engle's science fictional *Time Trilogy* (1979) describe boys considered effeminate or ineffectual by other youngsters, whose apparent weakness turns out to be a strength. Many other novels celebrate the taming of more traditionally masculine boys. In Virginia Hamilton's remarkable *M. C. Higgins, the Great* (1974), for instance, a backwoods boy turns from sitting in splendidly masculine antisocial isolation on top of the phallic pole erected by his father to the more communal (and traditionally female) task of holding his family together. Surprisingly often, the taming requires physical mutilation: in Marguerite d'Angeli's *The Door in the Wall* (1949), a crippling disease turns a medieval

squire from macho knighthood to gentle musicianship, and in both Esther Forbes's tale of the American Revolution, *Johnny Tremain* (1943), and Ursula *Le Guin's fantasy, *Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), a cocky youngster undergoes accidental self-maiming as the first step in learning service to others.

The taming of male children takes an ugly turn in books by mainstream women that deal with foreign or minority children. In Elizabeth Foreman Lewis's *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* (1932), an American woman missionary persuades a Chinese boy that his traditional culture is repressively superstitious. Middle-class women perform the same culture-effacing miracle for African-American and Hispanic boys in works written by white women through the decades; in these colonizing books, as in Nancy Drew, being foreign is just a particularly unfortunate form of machismo.

If the taming of male children represents a maternal wish-fulfilment, the taming of female ones is less a matter of fantasy than a social imperative, and a battalion of tomboys learn to temper their independence with concern for others. The surprising thing about books as diverse as Laura Ingalls Wilder's nostalgic Little House series (1932–1943), Eleanor Cameron's fantasy, *Court of the Stone Children* (1973), and Cynthia Voigt's contemporary reworking of the Odyssey in terms of a young female Odysseus, *The Homecoming* (1981), is not that they sensibly balance freedom with responsibility; it's that they always start with independent girls instead of repressed ones, and therefore move to their happy endings by qualifying independence, rather than vice-versa. Surely most real children move in the opposite direction.

But not all tomboys get tamed. In her outrageous masterpiece *Harriet the Spy* (1964), Louise Fitzhugh craftily pushes her notebook-keeping protagonist toward what seems like the usual compromise between self-fulfilment and the needs of others—and then offers no compromise. The would-be writer Harriet keeps on writing, and learns no more than the subversive and useful skill of being just hypocritical enough to continue her work of expressing herself in safety.

Meanwhile, the African-American heroine of the white Fitzhugh's *Nobody's Family Is Going to Change* (1974) is one of the few black female protagonists of children's fiction who ends a story of defiance of adult values still defiant. When black girls in novels by African-Americans, such as Virginia Hamilton's *Arilla Sun Down* (1976) and *A White Romance* (1987), Rosa Guy's *Ruby* (1976) and *Edith Jackson* (1978), and Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), find their need for freedom hedged

by their perception of limits, it means something different, more pragmatically necessary, and more painful than when white characters are urged to make the same move. These books imply a revealing correspondence between the attitudes demanded by life in an intolerant society and conventional American ideals of femininity.

It is not surprising that the children's books American women have written in this century mirror the conflicts women have faced, both in their own self-definition as nurturers and in their definitions of the children they nurture. What is surprising is the range of uniquely pleasurable reading material they have produced while doing so: the utopian delights of Porter's *Girl of the Limberlost*; the technicolor exuberance of Forbes's *Johnny Tremain*; the delicious irony of Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy*; the simple but deeply resonant prose of Margaret Wise Brown's picture book texts; of Wilder's *Little House* series; of novel after astonishing novel by Virginia Hamilton. This brief roll call of excellence merely suggests the depth and range of a significant literary enterprise—surely one of the major triumphs of American women's writing.

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