

"Balancing Acts: Noteworthy American Fiction." Touchstones: Reflections on the Best in Children's Literature, Volume 3, ed. Perry Nodelman. (Children's Literature Association, 1989). 164-171.

Written in 1989, this essay tries to predict which of the then currently discussed novels for children by American writers might be remembered as "touchstones" in later years.

Balancing Acts: Noteworthy American Fiction

by Perry Nodelman

Let me leap intemperately to the task at hand, and get the suspense over with: in my careful and coolly objective opinion, the American children's novels among those currently highly regarded that are most likely to be considered touchstones by future generations are E.L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, Katharine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea Trilogy*, and Virginia Hamilton's *M.C. Higgins, the Great*. The American children's novels that are currently highly regarded and that future aficionados of children's literature will say *ought* to be considered touchstones, but that will in fact be read mainly by those future aficionados, are Cormier's *I Am the Cheese*, Konigsburg's *George*, Hamilton's *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl*, Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*, William Steig's *Abel's Island*, Eleanor Cameron's *Court of the Stone Children*, Paula Fox's *One-Eyed Cat*, Randall Jarrell's *The Animal Family*, and Meindert de Jong's *Journey from Peppermint Street*. And the American children's novels that are currently highly regarded,

that are indeed excellent, but that will not be read much or known much at all in the future are—well, I am not about to name those, for I don't wish to have my face punched in by hurt authors or their angry fans. Those wanting the bad news are advised to consult listings of Newbery award winners in order to determine those I have not named.

The most obvious question my choices raise is, why the two different categories of them? Why do some books look to be shoo-ins as classics of the future, while others will be what Shakespeare called caviar to the general—read only by specialists? The answer is in the nature of the books on my second list—they are caviar. For the most part, they are books that I myself find more interesting and believe to be finer, subtler, more complex, in some deep and real sense truer, than the books on my first list; but I am not a child. And not only am I an adult, but I am an adult specialist, and so I inevitably admire that which is highly innovative and unusual, that which surprises me by taking the traditional forms of children's fiction with which I am so well-acquainted and ringing startling and, for me, exciting changes on them. Unlike the general readership of children's books, I have learned to like caviar.

The books on my second list are all caviar—startling, unsettling, wonderfully inventive achievements; but the books on my first list judiciously combine innovation with convention, in just that right balance that makes a book both unique and readable enough to be popular. So they will in fact be widely read and widely enjoyed not just by specialists but also by young readers with little experience of literature; perhaps just as important, they will be read, recognized and enjoyed, and recommended to those young readers, by adults with a somewhat less specialized knowledge of children's literature than my own—by teachers and school librarians and even by parents who remember these books from their own childhoods. As for those books that are less innovative and more conventional, they are the ones on the third list that I did not provide; many fine books fall into this category, but they are merely excellent in the ways we already expect books to be excellent, rather than startlingly excellent in a new way that we could not have expected.

But in order to explain what I mean by that, I must provide examples, so I suppose I will have to stop being so coy; so much for the future of my nose. Of the American writers of fiction named as noteworthy by the Children's Literature Association, the one that seems to me to best represent conventional excellence of this sort is Ellen Raskin. That may be a surprising thing to say—Raskin gives books weird titles like *The Mysterious Disappearance of Leon (I Mean Noel)*, and these books have quirky setups and weird situations. But in the long run, in fact, they are merely excellent versions

of a genre of fiction that surely is the most convention-ridden of all, the mystery. Raskin brilliantly offers young readers what that genre most importantly offers—intellectual puzzles. But she so focuses on the puzzle elements in her books that they end up seeming more like clever contrivances than like believable fictions. Future mystery buffs may enjoy them; they will not find a place on every shelf of classic children's books.

A number of other noteworthy authors are also blessed with the ability to contrive ingenious fictions. One of these, Natalie Babbitt, has often done so with charming and clever results, but with almost as great a lack of involving emotion as does Raskin. But in at least one book, Babbitt manages to temper ingenuity with depth of character and richness of emotion; the situation of *Tuck Everlasting* may be a little too much off the central beaten track of children's fiction plotting to define it as a touchstone—barring the unlikely development that it leads others to produce a whole literature for children about the vicissitudes of immortality, in which case it will have for future readers the conventionality that *Hamlet* and *Tom Jones* lacked for their original audiences but have for us; but unlike much of Babbitt's work, *Tuck Everlasting* manages to be as deeply affecting as it is unusual.

Just as unusual, and far more available to a wide spectrum of readers, is E.L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. This book displays both the delightfully snippy, unfailingly brilliant wit and the obsessively rigorous moral fervor that Konigsburg expresses in all her quirky novels; and its situation, revolving around two children who run away from home to take up residence in a museum, is both inherently ingenious and cleverly explored to reveal much about character. But the book also offers more conventional pleasures: an excitingly adventurous plot and some well drawn and clearly understood characters. Konigsburg's even more ingenious *George*, a book about a young boy with a vulgar little man living inside of him, explores many of the same themes of the safety of conformity and of moral integrity as does *From the Mixed up Files*, and does it in a far more unsettling manner; but again, the book may be too unusual and too unsettling to continue to find the wide audience I wish there would be for it.

Konigsburg is one of the few recent American writers for children who manages to write realistically and comically at the same time. Her humor is always achingly painful in its unblinking honesty about human failings; the more popular Beverly Cleary is both less dangerously comic and less penetratingly realistic, and therefore, less noteworthy.

Fortunately, there are a number of topnotch practitioners of comedy in the form of fantasy—where painful truths may be explored

more honestly but less openly. Arnold Lobel, who is perhaps better known as an illustrator than as a writer of fiction, has produced what may be the only easy-to-read, limited vocabulary fiction (besides Dr. Seuss's ground-breaking *The Cat in the Hat*) that has a chance of being remembered as great children's literature. In his Frog and Toad series, Lobel uses the limitations of his genre the way inspired poets use the sonnet form; these simple and often hilarious stories resonate with surprising depths of subtle complexity. Another illustrator, William Steig, has produced not only a series of picture books that surprisingly and delightfully combine quite simply drawn cartoons with ornately complex diction and phrasing, but also, the brilliant *Abel's Island*, a novel in which a highly civilized mouse is deserted on an island just like Robinson Crusoe, and also just like Robinson Crusoe, resolutely refuses to give in to the primitive savagery of his situation by turning into an animal. The fact that he *is* in fact an animal makes the book very funny and deliciously unsettling.

Less comic but just as unsettling are two marvelously controlled fantasies by Randal Jarrell, an author who is not but who should have been named to the ChLA list of noteworthy authors. Better known for his humane poetry for adults than for his few children's books, Jarrell nevertheless accomplishes wonders in both *The Bat Poet* and *The Animal Family*. The first, the story of how a bat comes to be a poet, is as painless and as precisely and beautifully written an introduction to poetry as could be imagined; if enough teachers recognize its amazing ability to provide students with the right sort of regard for well-wrought words, it has a chance of surviving as a touchstone children's book. *The Animal Family* is a different sort of book altogether, obviously but not ponderously allegorical; it offers much to think about, and the graceful rhythms of Jarrell's luminous prose make it a joy to read aloud. Jarrell was no storyteller, no weaver of fantastic adventures and exciting events, and that means that his books will always be caviar, for whatever else, children's books that become touchstones always manage to tell a good story. But the lucid simplicity of Jarrell's books makes them the kind of caviar that might well give young readers a taste for caviar—at least those young readers lucky enough to have brave adults in their lives who are willing to try to introduce them to caviar.

Equally rich in taste but more likely to be widely read and enjoyed by future young readers are the three books set on the planet of Earthsea by Ursula LeGuin. These books do have plot—lots of plot, lots of adventure, lots of excitement. Indeed, the first of them, *The Wizard of Earthsea* is not particularly unusual—it is an excellent but relatively conventional rendering of the sort of high fantasy that has become exceedingly familiar since Tolkien's Ring trilogy. Had LeGuin stopped at that first book, her future reputation

would be far less assured. But the second book, *The Tombs of Atuan*, is highly unusual, a high fantasy that finds its central character in an unheroic young girl doomed to a passive life in the darkness, and its unusual imagery in Jungian archetypes. As usual, it is the precarious balance maintained between the conventional and the innovative—between high adventure and poetic prose, between strong plotting and subtle psychological exploration—that suggests a long life for this series.

LeGuin's prose is often as lucid and as beautiful as Jarrell's; so, too, is the prose of Meindert de Jong, particularly in *Journey from Peppermint Street*, a book which maintains the point of view of a young child more successfully than any other children's book not written by Laura Ingalls Wilder or William Mayne. De Jong's numerous excellent children's books tend to be like many other children's books in all ways but their author's understanding and sheer control of the genres he writes within; but this one book dwells so intently on some common aspects of children's fiction that it raises them to a new level of intensity.

In many ways, Katherine Paterson is a writer much like de Jong. She writes brilliantly, but always strictly within the confines of conventional, easily recognizable forms. Her historical novels set in Japan and China are wonderful historic novels; her realistic fiction about contemporary children so convincingly evokes realistic children that it shows up the shallow unreality of most other supposedly realistic fiction about contemporary children. *Bridge to Terabithia* stands apart from the rest of Paterson's work and may achieve status as a touchstone only because it allows the death of one of its central characters to become a central part of the plot—and because it does that in a way that allows readers a vicarious but intense experience of the arbitrary randomness and abruptness and finality of death.

Amongst the other books that Paterson's subtle evocations of reality make seem unreal are most of the books that were labelled as "the new realism" in the nineteen seventies. These novels each centered around some deep trauma of youth—pimples, the divorces of parents, lost boyfriends, a death in the family—and usually allowed their protagonists to solve the problem by adopting an easy doctrine of egocentric self-acceptance. As one of the earliest and most successful of such books, Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* is sure to have historical relevance to future generations of children's literature scholars; and I suspect children will continue to enjoy reading it as long as children like to think they are wiser than their elders, which may be forever.

Robert Cormier's novels also work to confirm the egocentricity of adolescence—but far more chillingly, for Cormier captures a strain of adolescent cynicism so successfully that his books ideally

fulfill the adolescent conviction that the world is a horrible place, that everyone but me is corrupt and I'm not so sure about myself after all. In *The Chocolate War*, Cormier successfully and chillingly evokes the bleak paranoia of adolescence in the context of a fairly conventional problem novel; the brilliantly contrived *I Am the Cheese* goes one stage further, for the construction of its plot forces a reader to experience and actually share its protagonist's fears.

It was clearly distaste for his "unchildlike" qualities that caused the ChLA touchstones committee to ignore Cormier; it is an omission that ought to be corrected. The aspects of adolescence (and also, I am afraid, of childhood) that Cormier so unsettlingly depicts do rarely find expression in children's literature, whose characteristic mode is optimism; but his accurate depiction of these undoubtedly significant matters in books that are both technically accomplished and widely successful will surely change our popular perception both of children's literature and of the tastes and interest of children enough for future commentators to consider Cormier a writer of great significance.

But if Cormier continues to be read by future generations of young readers, it will be because he manages to provide the excitement and suspense that is the most primary pleasure of fiction as well as a convincingly dark vision of reality. Other writers who explore the darker aspects of human existence often find smaller audiences, not because their books are dark but because they are not both dark and obviously exciting. It is Cormier's ability to combine melodrama and high art that makes his work a likely future touchstone; and unfortunately, fine writers less given to melodramatic hysteria and consequently, more capable of writing convincingly realistic fictions, are less likely to be widely read. One interesting example is Paula Fox, whose *The Slave Dancer* is a believable yet anything but lurid depiction of life on a slave ship, and whose brilliant *One-Eyed Cat* exudes an overwhelming sense of quiet desperation. Another is Ilse-Margret Vogel, whose marvelous series of short autobiographical novels for quite young readers maintains a tense balance between a delicate nostalgia and hard subjects like death, insanity, and a child's envy of her mother's sexuality. Two books that might well come to be considered touchstones if only they could find a wider audience are Vogel's *Farewell, Aunt Isabel*, in which children cope with their aunt's insanity, and *My Summer Brother*, in which young Inge has a crush on the same young man as her mother.

Eleanor Cameron has written realistic fiction for children that is as convincingly intense as Vogel and Fox, in novels like *A Room Made of Windows* and *To the Green Mountains*. But as accurate evocations of the lives of children, these books are merely

convincing—they lack that touch of the unusual that might attract specific attention to them, and someday give them the status of touchstones. The book by Cameron that has that touch of the unusual as well as her usual unfailing accuracy about childhood is *Court of the Stone Children*. Here Cameron cleverly transposes the British genre of time fantasy, in which a child from the present encounters figures from the past, into an American setting, a museum in San Francisco. Nothing in the book is not realistic, for it is fantasy only in that it fantastically combines historically accurate depiction of two different times; but everything in it has an aura of magic.

So, too, does everything in Virginia Hamilton's *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl*; but as its title boldly announces, this clever and cleverly told story is quite assertively magical, less interested in evoking the real world than in replacing it with another, more interesting one. Like Cameron's, the book is a reworking of a tradition from another place, but this time the place is Africa and the material is various folk legends. Hamilton is attempting nothing less than to provide black Americans with a mythology; that she succeeds to the extent she does, and in the process invents such a rich and beautiful style of prose to do it in, is to her credit.

But that rich and beautiful style requires some close and careful attention. It needs a reader who enjoys the shapes and rhythms, and ideally, the sounds when spoken aloud, of beautifully wrought language; and that is true of all of Hamilton's fiction—particularly her more recent novels. Books like *A Little Love* and *Junius Over Far*—and *Pretty Pearl*—represent a fascinating attempt to integrate speaking voices and thinking minds into the narrative line of a plot—to combine the oral and the literary in a way that brings contemporary children's fiction much closer to its original roots. These books are a delight to read, for someone willing to suspend expectations and give them the effort they sometimes require. Paradoxically, in fact, because they are less literary than we have come to expect, these books are caviar; but I suspect that less experienced readers who have not yet become bound up in literary conventions might actually find books like *Junius Over Far* quite palatable, if more adults had the courage to either read them to children or recommend that children read them themselves.

Also caviar, perhaps, is *M.C. Higgins, the Great*, Hamilton's earlier novel about a boy finding a way to hold his family together and save his threatened home. But the thrilling plot of this book—a slag heap is poised above the Higgins home, and may fall at any time—and the careful orchestration of a variety of different elements, plot and imagery and diction—make it Hamilton's most accessible and as well as her most complex book. If any book deserves to be considered a touchstone, it is *M.C. Higgins, the Great*,

for it represents how complex and how profound apparently simple fictions can be. Indeed, if any still productive children's writer deserves to have her entire body of work considered as a touchstone, it is Virginia Hamilton—our greatest living children's writer, our most surprising and infuriating, our most daring and perhaps our wisest.

It is a cliché in discussions like this one for their writers to end by saying that they offer their opinions humbly and modestly, for they know that it is in fact not themselves but future generations who will make such decisions. But I wonder if that's true. Frank Kermode suggests that criticism may actually be the necessary medium in which great books can continue to exist. It is in fact our discussion *now* of these books, our bandying about of their names and our discussion of their merits, that will keep them current and cause future readers to know about them, to read them, and, we hope, to enjoy them. In fact, it is not future generations who will decide what their great children's books are—it is our responsibility now to do that for them. So I submit my lists without modesty or humility, indeed, in the arrogant hope that the great children's literature of the future will be the children's literature I myself admire and therefore know to be wonderful today.

REFERENCES

Kermode, Frank. *Forms of Attention*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985.