

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Some members of the association have been annoyed that only negative comments have been printed in the Canon Reports we've published since the ChLA Canon was first released a year or so ago. Unfortunately, we haven't received any positive ones to print. I hope somebody out there shares my idea that the ChLA Canon is a useful list, and will write a short article for us that says why. Meanwhile, as a member of the committee that produced the list, I'd like to comment on some of the criticisms of it that we've published so far.

In "Spanish Kids Got No Books?" (Summer, 1983), Peter Neumeyer suggests that the word canon implies too much authority, that there's no particular reason for stopping the list at 1970, that the term "Worth Watching" is condescending, and that the list is preposterously Anglo-Saxon. Michael Steig (Winter, 1983), also objects to the "authoritative" nature of the list, mostly because he finds it unauthoritative; too many important names have been left out. And too many of the writers listed as "worth watching" have already established significant reputations.

These objections contain some truth. The list is indeed flawed—as all such lists are. But those flaws merely allow for what I've always assumed the purpose of the canon to be: to promote stimulating discussion, discussion of the sort both Neumeyer and Steig are taking part in.

Steig disagrees with the members of the Canon committee that Barrie, Baum, Bemelmans, Burton, Hoban, Jarrell, Lawson, Leaf, LeGuin, Lofting, Pene du Bois, and Travers are not worthy of inclusion; while I'd go along with him on some of those writers, I'd happily fight about Barrie or Bemelmans or Lofting, all of whom seem to me to have reputations must vaster than their talent. And while I know there are members of the Canon committee who'd defend the merits of Lloyd Alexander, whom Steig implies is equal to none of these, I might personally be persuaded by Steig on that one—if he swayed me with some good arguments. The point is, the list is not authoritarian, and could never possibly be. As our public and private disagreements about it suggest, we're just too humanly disputatious to let it be authoritarian.

In arriving at the canon, the members of the committee had wonderful arguments with each other. But we did resolve them, and the way we did so is instructive. Finally, we agreed to name on the list only those books that none of us would feel particularly upset about naming as both important and worthwhile. The books we chose share at least three significant qualities. One, they all are excellent children's books, in all of our opinions. Two, they all are noteworthy children's book—ones that represent important trends or that started important new styles. Three—and perhaps most important—they are all *acknowledged* to be important, not just by members of the committee, but by those who know children's books.

There are many excellent books that do not have such a reputation—among them, books by Russell Hoban and Ursula LeGuin and Randall Jarrell. There are also, we discovered as we argued, books that have such reputations but not the high degree of merit we looked for. To our surprise, we found a lot of agreement amongst ourselves about the well-known names we would rather not include—in particular, Baum and Barrie. In leaving those names off the list, we made a conscious decision to demand both significance and merit—or, let's be honest, our agreement with each other about both significance and merit. Perhaps, to be perfectly fair, we should have added another category to the list: over-rated books that are nevertheless well-known enough to be considered important.

Also to our surprise, we found we could reach little agreement about more recent books. Personally, I'm convinced that *From the Mixed Up Filed of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* and *M. C. Higgins*

the Great are both important and excellent; other members of the committee (whose taste, I have to acknowledge, is undeniably deficient) assured me I was absolutely wrong, and meanwhile, pig-headedly plumped for other, quite clearly lesser novels. Finally, we had to assume that our own disagreements about these books would likely be shared by many other people who read a lot of children's books; and we felt we had no choice but to create a list of writers whose reputations are "worth watching." The writers on this list have written books that may turn out to be important—and may, also, just disappear from public discussion, as have many good books in the past.

It's important to say that it's the *reputations* of these writers that are worth watching—not the writers themselves, some of whom are too dead to pay all that much close attention. None of us would deny that the books by these writers are interesting—that's why we created the "worth watching" category in the first place. But even books by dead writers may not be conceded by a general consensus to be important until years after their death—and we weren't yet ready to do the work of the literary world in general and assert that these books are important.

Most of the objections made to the canon center around these two sorts of books—the well-known ones we left out, and the good ones we said were only worth watching. Even though I don't necessarily agree with some of the actual choices the committee as a whole arrived at, I believe in the necessity of both categories. I believe in them simply because I am suspicious of reputation as a guide to literary excellence; I have been ever since I tried to read Proust. *The Wizard of Oz* is a popular book, but in my opinion, an astonishingly clumsy one; I hope its absence from the list will provoke people who know children's books into thinking about whether it really deserved to be there. I equally hope that our list of writers whose reputations are worth watching will encourage some watching, and some thinking—and that maybe some of these writers who wouldn't otherwise be read much will be, simply because they're included in this list.

In arriving at the canon, the members of the committee . . . agreed to name . . . noteworthy children's books . . . acknowledged to be important . . .

Since I see the canon as a list of excellent books that have deservedly sizeable reputations, I don't buy Peter Neumeyer's upset with its Anglo-Saxon bias. There may be many excellent German and Spanish books that are significant milestones in the development of children's literature, just as there are many significant books written in English in earlier centuries. But while the names of such books may be known, they simply aren't read by the vast majority of English-speaking people who read children's books, and therefore, they are disqualified from inclusion. That the canon deals only with children's books currently considered to be important in English should, perhaps, have been said; but I think the inclusion of many translations of folk tales and legends, and of books like *Pinocchio*, makes that reasonably clear. Should Neumeyer get others of us to read and admire those books for Spanish kids in sizeable enough numbers to give them a high profile, maybe they will appear on the canon someday; but putting them there to make them better known would be a serious mistake, I think—a manipulative attempt to create what ought to be instead of a description of what is.

Simply because it does attempt to describe consensus opinion, canon-making is not authoritarian. But for the same reason, canons do indeed have authority, and I certainly hope that people who don't know much about children's literature use our list as a

guide to their reading. I suspect that Neumeyer and Steig's objections have been made in behalf of such people, who don't know enough about children's literature to see the flaws in the list, and who will treat it as a set of commandments rather than as the basis for discussion. But people aren't sheep, especially when it comes to literary taste, and I'd bet that anybody who used our list as a guide to children's literature would be just as willing to disagree about some of our choices as are Neumeyer and Steig, at least by the time they've read everything on it. Their knowledge would automatically make them into canon-makers, and canon-making is a never-ending process, a process of disagreement and discussion that, ideally, leads us to better understand what is good and what matters. As such, it's merely another branch of literary criticism.

But it's a process only so long as those who do it work hard to avoid ossification—only if we keep aspiring to our goal of understanding and conscientiously refuse to ever reach it. Consequently, I'm glad to notice lots of activity on the canon front. Those who complained (quite justly, I think) about the price will be happy to hear that a new canon pamphlet is in the works. This one will have short descriptions of each of the books, which will lead to more healthy controversy by suggesting reasons for their inclusion; also, if all goes well and God is on our side this time, there will be no typos. Also in the works is a new ChLA book, tentatively called *The Great Children's Books*; it'll include the canon itself, and articles discussing why various of the books named are indeed great. Contributors are being sought for chapters in this volume—you'll find a call for proposals elsewhere in this issue.

Attentive readers will have noticed a change in *Quarterly* documentation style over the past few issues. We've adopted the new MLA guidelines. There are some significant changes. There are no footnotes giving bibliographic information; instead, a list of references at the end of each article gives bibliographic entries in alphabetical order. Ideally, references to authors or titles within the body of an article are integrated into the text: "as Jones says in *My Masterpiece* . . .," with page references in parentheses following quotations. If clarity so demands, the names of books or authors may also be placed in parentheses after a quotation. We're doing what we can in the *Quarterly* to avoid the stodginess of pseudo-scholarship, and therefore suggest a minimum of footnotes—none would be ideal.

The new guidelines also eliminate roman numerals, remove the abbreviations "p." and "pp." from page references, and provide a new form for journal documentation. Note the details in this example:

"Editor's Comments," *ChLA Quarterly* 9, 2 (Summer, 1984):2. For further information, see "Report of Advisory Committee on Documentation Style," *PMLA* 97 (May 1982): 318-324.

I note with regret the death of Warren Wooden, a member of the *Quarterly* editorial board and a distinguished scholar of early children's literature. Woody was to edit the special section devoted to establishing a canon of historical children's literature that will appear in the Spring, 1985 issue of the *Quarterly*. The special section has been taken over by his friend Jeanie Watson of Southwestern at Memphis, and will constitute a tribute to Woody.

Perry Nodelman

Randall Jarrell's *The Bat Poet*: An Introduction to the Craft

by Peter F. Neumeyer

And now, that an overfaint quietness should seem to strew the house for Poets, they are almost in as good reputation, as the Mountibanks at Venice.

Sir Philip Sidney

Randall Jarrell's *The Bat Poet* is a children's animal story. But it is also much more. Through the development of the little bat who learns to say poetry, the book introduces children to the working concerns of a learning poet, and offers a mature and precise contemplation of the nature of poets and poetry. As such, its coverage is systematic and thorough to such a degree that I have, in fact, used it as a basic text in a poetry writing class for non-English majors.

Short stories, my students may have seen before. But poems, they have hardly ever contemplated. They don't know what they are, how they come to be, how they exist in the universe. And they are afraid of them. They certainly don't think they can write poems.

Instead of beginning right off by writing, therefore, we begin, rather unfashionably, with Jarrell's little forty-three page treatise disguised as a children's story. In a couple of days, our class is writing like other classes. But we have begun with a theoretical treatise accompanying a fledgling (literally) poet in his *Lehrjahr*.

The situation in Jarrell's *The Bat Poet* is simply that a little bat, normally sleeping during sunlight hours, like his brothers and sisters, once ventures out in the daytime, hears the local poetaster, a mockingbird, imitating and making poems, and learns to do the same. The bat learns the facts of life about poems (and poets). I shall list these, just as the little bat learns them.

1. *Poets see and observe.*

Toward the end of summer, all the bats except the little brown bat protagonist go to sleep in the barn. The little bat, however, stays awake in the daytime, and keeps his eyes open and looks, even though his brethren say accurately, "When you wake up in the daytime the light hurts your eyes—the thing to do is to close them and go right back to sleep."

Literally, the artist sees what to others is invisible or painful. The poet as seer is a familiar figure, established since the dawn of literature. Enough here to say that artists as seers who hurt in the light of their vision have become major characters in modern literature by way of the Romantic imagination, and through the suffering personae of such as Byron, Hans Christian Andersen, James Joyce, and Thomas Mann.

The artist is a seer; he is "different"; he pays a price in order to see in such a clear light.

2. *What and how do artists see?*

They see what has not been perceived and articulated before (for the others have eyes, but they see not).

It is the mockingbird, whom the little bat had heard often singing half the night through, who becomes the mentor for the little bat. The mockingbird "made up songs and words all his own, that nobody else had ever said or sung." The poet, (even the poetaster) is, thus, "original."

3. *What does the poet/seer, who is original, sing about?*

The poet/seer, in fact, sings about, mimics "the real world." He makes imitations. The mockingbird, would "imitate the way the squirrels chattered when they were angry, like two rocks being knocked together; and he could imitate the milk bottles being put down on the porch and the barn door closing, a long rusty