

ENGLISH LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

Stories and poems aimed at children have a very long tradition, rooting back to the beginnings of the British nation. British children's poetry which started with nursery rhymes collected in the famous "*Mother Goose*" (first published in England by John Newbury in 1791) they say dates back to before the Norman conquest. Yet, before 1800 there was no children's literature as such. British books aimed at children would be a few instructional works to help with general knowledge and Puritanistic tracts to help moral upbringing. The only children's genre surviving from this period is the ABC and children's primers, which range from the excellently illustrated, yet grimly Puritanistic New England Primer (1687-1690), "*The Childe's New Plaything*" (1742) to the most recent colorful editions.

In the 18th -- early 19th centuries children would read translated fables, fairy-tales, popular ballads, and adopt philosophical and satirical allegories, like John Bunyan's "*The Pilgrim's Progress*" (1678), "*The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*" (1719) by Daniel Defoe, and "*Gulliver's Travels*" (1726) by Jonathan Swift, yet, such works were not written for them and children only mistook them for simple adventure stories with vivid details absent from their boring instructive books.

British children's literature stems from two powerful traditions: instructive and moralistic literature and folk tales and ballads. But for real it started with the turn of the XVIII century when it formulated its new principle – not only to instruct, but to do so through entertainment. In Britain, the most popular book written specially for children was published by John Newberry in 1744 and was titled "*A Little Pretty Pocket Book*." Besides purely moralistic books, children were finally offered specially adapted "grown-up" classics, including "*Tales from Shakespeare*" (1807) by Charles and Mary Lamb, the afore-mentioned Daniel Defoe's "*Robinson Crusoe*," and "*Gulliver Travels*" by Jonathan Swift, and folk tales and ballads,

including translations from Charles Perrot, the Grimm brothers (1823), and, starting from the second half of the XIX century, Hans Christian Andersen.

The classic Golden Age of children's literature in English started from the second half of the XIX century and continued till the Second World War. It became possible when British children's authors abandoned the early didacticism together with the traditional Jean-Jacque Rousseau's concept of "children's natural innocence" and his idea that all books for children save "Robinson Crusoe" were a dangerous diversion. Such books as Mary Sherwood's "History of the Fairchild Family" (1818-1847) with its dark moral warnings, regular reference to biblical verses and the famous passage where the Fairchild father takes his children to see a corpse on a gibbet as a final Awful Warning, became obsolete. New philosophy with its core concepts of game, pleasure, and fantasy opposed the traditional Victorian values of purposefulness and discipline.

The revolution started with the publication of Edward Lear's "Book of Nonsense" (1846), a collection of absurd limerics as anarchic and pointless as any rebellious child might wish. In prose it continued with "The Rose and the Ring" (1855) by William Makepeace Thackeray, an adventure fairy-tale that put fantasy first, moral lessons second. Such revolution can be best witnessed by comparing the immensely popular during the Victorian Age, and grossly outdated now "Water-Babies" (1863) by an Anglican priest Charles Kingsley and the immortal "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (1865) and "Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There" (1871) by an Oxford professor of mathematics and logic Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson). Kingsley uses the story of a little chimney-sweep only as a vehicle to introduce traditional moral values, elements of natural history, theology, and history. Carroll, on the other hand, tells a story of a little girl's absurd adventures to entertain and to mock the traditional didactic approach to children's fiction and children's upbringing. He used the traditional British nonsense to show how absurd

the "grown-up word" can be by writing parodies on all the classical didactic British verses for children, who abhorred them ever so much. Thus Lewis Carroll became a trustful ally of British children and started modern British fiction for them.

New values and views propelled children's fiction towards becoming fiction as such, without reservations. From now on younger children could expect stories written for their particular interest and taking into account the needs of their own limited experience of life. Such new attitude to children brought about a range of new topics, genres, and styles of writing. The turn of the XIX century saw the development of the author's, or literary tale, children's science fiction, children's historical novel, children's adventure and mystery story, ever abundant children's poetry, etc., together with a growing number and quality of adapted folktales and ballads. Such folktale adaptations are best represented by a series of 12 "colour" books by Andrew Lang (starting with "The Blue Fairy Book" (1889) and ending with "The Lilac Fairy Book" (1910)), who also wrote a number of original tales, including "The Gold of Fairnilee" (1888). Another outstanding folklorist and story-teller was Joseph Jacobs (1854-1916), who compiled, adapted, and published many collections of fairy tales, including "English Fairy Tales" (1890), "Celtic Fairy Tales" (1892), and "Europe's*** Fairy Book" (1916). Originally, these folklore collections were intended for grown-ups, but tastes changed and soon these books were mainly found on children's bookshelves. American children got a chance to enjoy skillfully reworked narratives about Robin Hood (1883) and King Arthur (1903) made by Howard Pyle.

From its very beginning, British children's literature tended to be gender-oriented. The adventure story was read by British boys many of whom were to fight for Britain in its colonies. Among the numerous adventure stories the most popular was "The Coral Island" (1858), a story of three boys wrecked on a desert island, by Robert Ballantyne who wrote

80 adventure books in 40 years; it was read by all schoolboys and later on its happily-ended exciting adventures prompted a parody, which became an all-time classic by a Nobel-prize winner – "Lord of the Flies" by William Golding. Another classic, "Treasure Island" (1883) by Robert Lewis Stevenson (1850-1894), became a most important landmark in the development of the adventure story for boys. Adventure novels by Henry R. Haggard and Conan Doyle, together with his Sherlock Holmes mysteries, also were very popular. Among the most popular novelists for girls was Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901), who also for 50 years published a girl's magazine "The Monthly Packet". In America, Yonge's success was repeated by Susan Coolidge in "What Katy Did" (1872) and Eleanor H. Porter in "Pollyanna" (1913).

Nonetheless, older children were still left without a literature of their own and their choice of reading was usually determined by their access to books with characters who were young people or animals, with whom they could easily identify, or action, such as exploring or fighting. Such a list of books included the American Fenimore Cooper's "The Last of the Mohicans" (1826), Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1852), Louisa M. Alcott's "Little Women" (1868), Mark Twain's "Adventures of Tom Sawyer," and the British Frances Hodgson Burnett's "Little Lord Fauntleroy" (1885). This factor explains the eventual growth and popularity of animal tales and adventure stories.

Taking into account children's interest in fairy-tales, it is quite natural that one of the strongest genres of British children's literature is fantasy in all of its numerous varieties. Its foundations, once strongly relying upon the didactic tradition, were laid by George Macdonald (1824-1905) in his classics "At the Back of the North Wind" (1871) and "The Princess and the Goblin" (1872). The tradition of the genre continued by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), in his philosophical allegories "The Happy Prince and Other Stories" (1888), famous for their refined language, images, and bitter messages

aimed primarily at a grown-up reader, and early collections by Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, Lord Dunsany (1878–1957), most famous for his high fantasy "The King of Elfland's Daughter" (1924). Rudyard Kipling, was a master of historical fantasy, as shown by his two collections "Puck of Pook's Hill (1906)" and "Rewards and Fairies" (1910). Both books bring to life episodes from British history as introduced by a fairy to two children and masterfully mix historical, fairytale, and realistic elements, which is characteristic of the British children's fantasy of the early XX centuries.

Such mix of the real and the fantastic was essential for children's books by Edith Nesbit (1857-1924) who successfully developed the motive of meeting miracles in real life and took the children's story further out of the adult world and more into the details of family life, imaginative games and domestic adventures. Nesbit wrote over 60 books for children and adolescents, but her most memorable books include "Five Children and It" (1902) about an ugly and evil-tongued sand fairy who lives in a sandpit, a sentimental novel "The Railway Children" (1906), and "The Story of the Amulet" (1906) about the adventures of an ancient Egyptian priest in modern London.

In America, the tendency to introduce the real into the fairy-tale became central to Frank L. Baum with his long series of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" (started 1900). Baum sincerely believed that the fairy-tale of the modern age should be rooted in the real and focused on explaining his wonders scientifically: Dorothy is taken to the fairy-land by a common tornado, the great magician Goodwin turns out to be a talented inventor of industrial wonders, one of Dorothy's companions is essentially a robot, etc.

An important landmark in the development of British children's literature proved to be a fantasy by John Barrie (1850-1937) about Peter Pan, a boy who refused to grow up and administered an island colony of lost boys. The book emerged from merry-making and games the author shared with the little Davies brothers. The book and its stage adaptations

made by the author have inherited the best features of the romantic cult of innocent childhood.

A new golden age of British fairy tale in which a miracle transforms every day life started in the 1930s. Pamela L. Travers (1906-1996) published several books about Mary Poppins, including the most famous "Mary Poppins" (1934) about a stern and businesslike governess who earns the love of children by making miracles that turn their daily life into a holiday. Similarly refined and playful books were also created by Eleanor Farjeon (1881-1965).

Barrie's book became a turning point for British children's literature of the XX century and continued the tradition of intimacy in British children's literature. Starting from George Macdonald and Lewis Carroll children's books become very personal as they often emerged from oral tales told to a certain real child. Such books captured the reader by their intimate tone and humour which came in place of over-sentimentalism and vague moralisations.

Such intimate intonations are best manifested in new animal tales, a second most prominent genre of British children's literature. Animal stories used to be part of the grown-up literature and once were treated quite seriously. For instance, Anne Sewell's "Black Beauty" (1877) was once set as compulsory reading in prison by way of reform for an adult guilty of animal cruelty. But with changing adult tastes, the animal story was left primarily to younger readers and it found its renaissance and a new intimate intonation in animal stories by Beatrix Potter (1866-1943), an author and illustrator of over 20 books, which grew from illustrated letters to her friends' children. The most famous titles by her include "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" (1900), "The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin" (1903), and "The Tale of Jeremy Fisher" (1906). All these stories are based on a common folk motive of the struggle of a small and weak character and a powerful giant, but, unlike the fairytale conflict, Potter resolves it not by victory over the

monster, but by a lucky escape of the animal character – a rabbit, a squirrel, a frog. Books by Beatrix Potter are full of humour, tenderness, and sentimentality celebrating the utopian happy childhood of long ago. Yet, she could also treat the motives of danger and death quite matter-of-factly.

This motive of utopian happy times of long ago also dominates the tales by Kenneth Graham (1859-1932), a recognized writer of animal stories. His masterpiece, "The Wind in the Willows" (1908) was born from a letter to his son, Alister. Its refined narration, crafty composition when each chapter is a separate tale contributing to the whole story, lively characters (Mole, Rat, Toad) and the motive of untroubled life undisturbed by grown-up worries have made this tale an all-time British classic.

A much more robust and energetic animal tale was written by Rudyard Kipling. His two "Jungle Books" (1894, 1895) about Mowgli, a human child brought up by a pack of wolves. Kipling also masterfully transforms the traditional didactic tale into an all-time classic in his "Just So Stories" (1902). These tales are hilarious answers to the eternal children's questions like "why the elephant has such a long nose," "how the alphabet came to be", etc. and, at the same time, they celebrate and teach core British values stemming from the Victorian tradition. With "Just So Stories" Kipling seemed to have invented a new variety in the genre of animal and mythological tale, which was followed, for instance, by the British poet laureate Ted Hughes in his "How the Whale Became and Other Stories" (1963).

With time, the plots of British children's books became considerably softer, with the dangers of Graham's Wild Wood and its Weasels and Kipling's Jungle and Sher-Khan giving way to the gentle concerns of Alan Alexander Milne's (1882-1956) Ashdown Forest described in his Winnie-the-Pooh tales. Milne became famous for his two poem collections "When We Were Very Young" (1924) and "Now We Are Six" (1927) which he wrote for his son, Christopher Robin. His "Winnie-the-Pooh" (1926) and

"The House at Pooh Corner" (1928) made him immortal. Milne's tales are remarkable for their deep understanding of children's way of thinking. They are addressed to grown-ups teaching them to be tolerant and to love thy neighbour exactly as he is.

Later, Milne's and Graham's tradition was followed by another British author, Michael Bond in his series about Paddington bear and his traveling adventures. Another writer of animal tales for younger audiences is Donald Bisset.

Another popular animal tale of the period is the cycle about Dr. Dolittle by Hugh Lofting (1886-1947) which starts with "The Story of Doctor Dolittle" (1922) with benign and absent-minded Dr. Dolittle and his animals sailing to Africa to cure a deadly monkey disease. Their further adventures are described in a great number of sequels illustrated by Lofting himself and present an amiable collection of eccentric animals and one of the most famous characters in children's fiction.

In America, animal tale was also one of the promising genres. One of the most popular US animal tales of the period, "Charlotte's Web" (1952) was written by Elvyn Brooks White. A different, but welcoming and peaceful world of an animal tale was created by American Dr. Seuss with his most famous Cat in the Hat series. Another trend in US children's fiction was unreserved absurdity rooted in southern humor and the tradition of traveling storytellers, as best represented by the immortal "Rootabaga Stories" by Carl Sandburg. The classical British-style fairy tale "The White Deer" was written by James Thurber.

The motive of cloudless childhood as something to be admired and protected from the unpleasant reality reached its summit in British children's literature in the 1930s in escapist best-sellers best represented by Enyd Blyton's (1897-1968) "Famous Five" series. In these novels Blyton described a gang of well-born privately educated children who were always free to have the most unlikely adventures, solving various mysteries buring

their largely unsupervised vacations secure in their knowledge that nothing bad could ever happen to them in the end. Even the start of the Second World War had no impact and was not registered in the self-enclosed world she created for her naughty characters. The books were so popular that during the War publishers spent much of their rationed paper to publish them at the expense of other books.

Yet, reaction against such dream-worlds was inevitable, more so because it coincided with the end of the Second World War, the growth of sales on children's books, the emergence of new children's libraries, etc. Progressive librarians and publishers urged British writers to explore new more realistic concerns and themes, to abandon middle-class snobbery and racism. In the realm of fantasy a similar spirit of moral toughness is evident in stories by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, Clive Staples Lewis, and Alan Garner. In America, their genius was matched by Ursula Le Guin.

The most important and fruitful contribution to the development of the British fairy tale was made by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) with his fairy story "The Hobbit, or There And Back Again" (1937). It's a traditional quest, whose main character, Bilbo Baggins, a non-heroic hobbit, lives through wonderful and terrible adventures to get a treasure guarded by a dragon. The essential feature, which made the book the first fantasy in British literature was the attention the author paid to creating the fairy world and its peoples which provide the background for Bilbo's adventures, as well as the introduction of keen character psychology and realistic language. This fairy world created out of mythological, epic and folktale motives continued to develop in the fantasy "The Lord of the Rings" (1954-1955) and "The Silmarillion," a mythology published posthumously.

The tendency to create, detalize and populate new fantastic worlds proved to be very fruitful and propelled later development of British fantasy, which becomes a primary genre of British children's literature after the Second World War. The tendency was developed, for instance, in the

Narnia chronicles (1950-1956), a 7-volume series by Clive Staples Lewis, which started with the famous "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" (1950). Lewis's alternative world behind a wardrobe, Narnia, visited by four ordinary children is created to discuss and set traditional Christian religious and moral values. The series combines the main motives and trends of British children's literature: the motive of a miracle interrupting ordinary daily life of a child, the motive of a weak innocent creature / child growing into a hero, the tendency of creating an attractive alternative world, and a powerful moral message.

Another successful attempt to clash the real and the fantastic world was taken by Alan Garner (b. 1934) in his trilogy about Alderly Edge children, including "The Weirdstone of Brisingamen" (1960), "The Moon of Gomrath," "Elidor" (1965), and "The Owl Service" (1967). He aptly used Nordic and Celtic mythology to fascinate the reader and make him meditate upon traditional battle of good and bad.

American writer of fiction, which can be classified both as science fiction and fantasy, Ursula Le Guin (b. 1929) exploits the creative flexibility of both these genres to explore social and psychological human identity. Applying Jungian psychology, Le Guin in her Earthsea fantasy collection explores the archetypal shadow and anima images.

British fantasy strongly relies upon Nordic, Celtic, and Germanic mythology and rich history and lore. The legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table is one of the most popular sources for British historical fantasy, including a brilliant 4-volume novel "The King of the Past and the Future" (1958) by Terence H. White (1906-1964) and "The Hollow Hills" by Mary Steward. The Roman conquest can also present interesting source material for British children's fantasy, as shown by a number of novels by Rosemary Sutcliff (1920-2012), including "The Eagle of the Ninth" (1954) and "The Light Beyond the Forest" (1979).

The period after the war also saw the development of the traditionally entertaining fairytales, as shown by novels by Mary Norton (1903-1992), including her 5 book cycle, "The Borrowers", started in 1952, about a family of little people living in nooks and cracks of old houses, who would "borrow" from big folks all they need and started on an epic journey to a new home when they were discovered by humans.

Towards the end of the century children's world becomes darker. One of the most popular children's authors in the post-war period is Roald Dahl (1916-1990) with his numerous novels, including "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" (1964), "James and the Giant Peach" (1961) characterized by grotesque, macabre and risqué humour and motives. A classic children's tale with gothic elements, "Little Broomstick", was written by Mary Stewart about a little witch and her magical education. Since the 1970s, children's horror books became a profitable commercial project, realized, for instance, in the "Goosebumps" series.

A much more traditional mix of humour and animal story is found in books by Dick King-Smith (b. 1922), the celebrated author of "The Sheep Pig" (1983) about a piglet Babe who wanted to be a sheepdog, and by Richard Adams, the author of "Watership Down" (1972), an uncommon sample of animal fantasy. Yet, in both these authors the topic of death and horror are still present and treated quite matter-of-factly. Pure unreserved children's humour is best represented by Jeremy Strong, the author of numerous books with memorable titles, including "The Invasion of Christmas Puddings" and "My Brother's Famous Bottom".

British children's literature at its best has never seized to maintain its connection with the real world, either at the level of plot or at the level of characters' psychology and the message to the reader. One of its main concerns has always been the motive of growing up set usually within the framework of the so-called school story. The most classical example of it would be Thomas Hughes's "Tom Brown's Schooldays" (1857), a XIX

century bestseller for boys, followed by bluntly honest and eye-opening Rudyard Kipling's "Stalky and Co.". Later realistic fiction would include books by Nina Bowden (1925-2012) "Carrie's War" (1973) and K. M. Peyton (b. 1929) among many others.

The 1990s started a renaissance of children's fantasy and a growing interest in children's literature due to commercialization of fiction and its merge with cinema, promoting children's books. Joan K. Rowling started a new boom with her 7 book series about a young orphan magician Harry Potter, beginning with "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" (1997). The books represent the best features of British children's literature: they started as a story told to Rowling's children, hence their intimate understanding of children's interests and psychology, they detailize the invented world like a fantasy and strongly refer to the real world, too, being essentially a school story; they deal with the most common conflicts in British children's literature – growing pains and the combat between a weak and young protagonist and a powerful grown-up antagonist, and each book is a novel of its own, contributing to the plot of the whole series.

A much more sinister impression is left by another immensely popular British children's author, Philip Pullman (b. 1946) and his sensational trilogy "His Dark Materials" (1995-1999), which includes "The Golden Compass," "The Subtle Knife" and "The Amber Spyglass." Being inspired by Milton's "Paradise Lost", this story of a girl from an alternative Oxford, Lyra Belaqua and her materialized soul, Pantalaimon, and her battle against a powerful organization in search of knowledge suddenly has no traditional moral bearing, though having some very disturbing references to Christian culture, and is a series of exciting adventures in an exciting world, which excite compassion to a character who is neither good nor evil.

A very interesting recent development is seen in the books by Neil Gaiman (b. 1960), who mixes and reshapes traditional fairytale motives in

his novels, which include "Neverwhere," "American Gods," "The Graveyard Book," and, most notably, "Stardust."

Besides novels, a huge proportion of contemporary British books for children is represented by picture books based upon popular TV series. Such books explore typically British aspects of life, including the British hobby of trainspotting (see "Thomas and Friends", a railway series originally written by Rev. W. Audry), the British concept of farming (see Shaun the Sheep), the British concept of the resourceful postman ("Pat the Postman,") etc. Also popular are series of stories, for example, the Little Men and Little Miss libraries books, originated by Roger Hansgrove. Such projects, usually supported by one of the largest British children's publishers, Egmont, have clear commercial foundations.

A good many of British children's books became popular due to the efforts of excellent illustrators, including John Tenniel, Carroll's illustrator E.H. Shephard, Milne's illustrator, Quentin Blake, Roald Dahl's illustrator, Tony Ross, whose works range from classical "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" to bizarre "Dr. Xargle's Book of Earth Tiggers," Mike Inkpen with his Wibbly Pig series, and others.

Trendy contemporary fiction for children mostly try to rid of social prejudice and exclusiveness, which are no longer found acceptable. Yet, other British writers concentrate on positive achievements, including William Mayne, Leon Garfield, Joan Aiken, Nina Bowden, and Ian Whybrow (see his "Little Wolf's Book of Badness").

A huge proportion of contemporary British children's literature is represented by poetry, virtually unknown to a foreign outsider. New poetry set a high standard for verses for children with Robert Louis Stevenson's "A Child's Garden of Verses" (1885) and Walter De La Mare's later collections of poems "Peacock Pie" (1913), "Come Here" (1923), and "Poems for Children" (1930), whose verses reveal a mystery that lurks behind every corner and a transformation that can happen even to ordinary things. At the

same type saccharine-sweet children poems abounded and will surely continue for ever. Some notion of it can be obtained by reading such authors as Spike Milligan with his "Silly Verse for Kids" and collections like "Another Day on Your Foot and I Would Have Died," a good selection of contemporary authors with their hilarious autobiographies at the end, including verses by John Agard, Wendy Cope, Roger McGough, Adrian Mitchell, and Brian Patten.

Contemporary British children's books are often recommended both to adults and children and so can help to bridge the ever present generation gap and to cater for mutual understanding, to say nothing about the pure joy they give.

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