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# Children's Literature in the Twenty-First Century and Beyond

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**Abstract:** We felt it was vital to acquire a sense of the present and future of the canon of works that have grabbed young hearts and inspired young brains in order to expand on a previous piece we'd written about the history of children's literature. While children's literature is obviously aimed at children, it is far from simple child's play; rather than a monolithic, formulaic, codified genre, it is a supple, ever-mutable collection of kaleidoscopic narratives that must simultaneously delight and educate their readers while seeking innovation and reliability.

**Keywords:** young adult, female readers, young adult novels, younger target audience, children's literature.

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## Literature for Children vs. Literature for "Young Adults"

Among the difficulties inherent in the study and debate of children's literature, as highlighted during our conversation with Ms. Kinkead, were those arising from the term "children's literature" itself. For starters, who is considered a child: do pre-teenagers and adolescents qualify, or are they part of the desirable young adult population sought after by publishers, film makers, and television executives alike? If "young adult" is to be considered a distinct entity, what is its relationship to children's literature?

According to Ms. Kinkead's experience, many young people who would be classed as part of the young adult demographic really read literature and other media aimed toward adults; it is youngsters younger than the young adult age that produce the majority of demand for this specific market. Similarly, Ms. Kinkead stated that, with a few noteworthy exceptions, female readers are typically responsive to young adult novels. "This might be indicative of how guys are raised in general," Ms. Kinkead speculated. They are expected to be harsher and less emotional. This approach would not be conducive to appreciating masterpieces that build on layer after layer of familial misery, emotional strain, and personal conflict.

Boys, she discovered things like factual books on World War II, guns, automobiles, technology, and famous people (the presidents and Steve Jobs were among the popular reads at the Lower School library). Ms. Kinkead was eager to point out that "Twilight" was a big hit with the younger children at St. Marks, and many students chose to read "Number the Stars" the 1989 story of a little girl and her family fleeing Nazi-occupied Copenhagen for their assignments.

Given the lukewarm response to young adult fiction among Ms. Kinkead's pupils, the remainder of our chat centered on children's picture books, but not completely. While picture books have a younger target audience and a consistent format (i.e., images in text), significant diversity in the books' styles, structures, and topics allow for acute observation and encourage conversation.

## Children's Book Awards for Literature and Picture Books

The American Library Association bestows multiple awards each year, but two are likely to be most recognizable to young readers and their parents: the Newbery and Caldecott Awards. The Newbery Award, named after John Newbery, the author of "A Little Pretty Pocket Book" in 1744, is "awarded annually to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children" based on the book's "interpretation of theme; presentation of information, including accuracy, clarity, and organization; development of plot; delineation of characters; delineation of setting; and appropriation."

The Caldecott Award, on the other hand, is given to "the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children" who demonstrates "excellence of execution in the artistic technique employed" and "excellence of pictorial interpretation of story, theme, or concept... and of delineation of plot, theme, characters, setting, mood, or information through the pictures," according to the biography of its namesake, illustrator Randolph Caldecott.

According to the American Library Association, neither prize is for "didactic intent or popularity" (Association of Library Service to Children, 4-6). This disclaimer refers back to the argument in our earlier post on children's reading about the importance of teaching against the primacy of diversion in these books. When asked to weigh in on this topic that even the likes of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau couldn't completely settle, Ms. Kinkead reasoned that while distraction is absolutely a vital part of children's picture books, "a well-written book will teach you a lot regardless. Even the writing art."

What can we learn from the most well-known children's books? With these thoughts and viewpoints in mind, we embarked on a journey through stacks and piles of award-winning novels from the past. We started with one of the first Newbery winners, "The Tale of Mankind" (1927) \*, which chronicles the story of humankind's evolution from cavemen to the present day and emphasizes how "ideas, movements, and individuals are more significant than dates" (Association for Library Service to Children, 84). Children throughout the twentieth century, like today's youngsters, have been captivated by novels that deal with history in some way; as a result, numerous works of historical fiction have garnered Newbery prizes for their contributions to American literature for youth. "The White Stag," for example, blends facts and folklore to convey its story. "The White Stag" (1931), for example, combines facts and legends to tell the story of the Hun invasion of Hungary; "Johnny Tremain" (1944), which recounts a fourteen-year-old's experience in the Boston Tea Party and the Battle of Lexington; and "Witch of Blackbird Pond" (1959), which tells the story of the Salem Witch Trials.

There are presently several sorts of children's books available. "Throughout the years," Ms. Kinkead noted, "writing has grown more complex, because authors recognize children can handle it. Children may be just as critical as adults." As a result, she noted that children's authors have "branched out into so many genres" over the decades, and the inclusion of the aforementioned works, as well as numerous others, on the list of Newbery recipients highlights the difficulty of lumping several disparate works together under the heading of "children's literature." This includes "Tales from the Silver Lands" (1925) and "Shen of the Sea" (1926), which are retellings of South American and Chinese folk tales, respectively; "Bridge to Terabithia" (1978), a fictional narrative that includes the death of one of its young protagonists; and Beverly Cleary's "Dear Mr. Henshaw" (1984), which is set against the backdrop of divorce. As such, it is critical to recognize that the concept of "children's literature" is rather fluid and inclusive, defined more by its readership than by any type of adherence to a set of touchstones and edicts.

Caldecott winners exhibit a comparable range of diversity and variance. The first winner, "Animals of the Bible" (1938), has black-and-white images that may not be as appealing to

today's readers as the more modern pieces "Black and White" (1991) and "Locomotive" (2014), which have fascinating plays with typography and texture. Ms. Kinkead believes that for children to respond positively to drawings, they must accurately represent the text. "They respond considerably more to non-abstract pictures," she explained. If visual familiarity and identification are the most crucial variables in piquing and retaining a young reader's curiosity and attention, illustrators have a broad variety of options within which to express their art.

For one thing, their illustrations can supplement non-traditional texts, such as "The Invention of Hugo Cabret" (2008), a 526-page book (described by author Brian Selznick as "not exactly a novel, not quite a picture book, not really a graphic novel, or a flip book, or a movie, but a combination of all these things") that, unlike the vast majority of other Caldecott winners or picture books, would be almost impossible to read aloud to an audience. Similarly, artists might utilize their own imagery to communicate shifting attitudes about cultural groups and societal inclusion. One simply needs to look at the stereotypical images of slaves in "Abraham Lincoln" (1940) and the heroes of "Snowy Day" (1963), whose novelty is precisely this, to see what I mean.

The written material and graphic aids that comprise picture books are always changing and adaptable enough to include practically anything. So, with this in mind, what is the future of children's literature? Ms. Kinkead provided several intriguing findings and theories to assist in answering this topic.

### **Trends in Literature and Publishing Today**

The incorporation of many genres, styles, and issues under the umbrella of children's literature has been a recurring theme in this article. The development of the graphic novel as a technique of retelling and recasting old works of literature underscores this fluid categorization. Shakespearean masterpieces, Moby Dick, and even A Wrinkle in Time have all been reissued as graphic novels, making them more affordable, accessible, and palatable to younger generations of readers, which may sound anathema to many.

Furthermore, classic works of literature can be remarketed for children to include margin notes and drawings illustrating historical details; for example, the Whole Story series has issued a series of books that provide such supplementary information to guide readers in their complete understanding of works and their contextual milieus. Similarly, the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, and The Boxcar Children have had their cover embellishments updated throughout the course of numerous editions to ensure their appeal stays consistent from generation to generation. Otherwise, youngsters, who do judge books by their covers and are quick to discard what appears to be outmoded to them, would be far less likely to immerse themselves in the same worlds that fed them.

While previously published stories are renamed and reimagined with new covers and layouts, some new stories are being distributed through whole new media, most notably digital books. Ms. Kinkead was quick to point out that a rising number of nonfiction, scientific-themed books have jumped on board this new style of consumption and enjoyment. Although the physical pleasure of a book is lost, readers may still take notes on electronic pages thanks to enabling software.

Nonetheless, with the increased popularity of digital media, a significant question arises: is reading from a screen the same as reading from a page? Are digital books to be viewed as virtual learning aids or as contraband as more schools use "TV-" or "computer-" turn-off weeks? Individual teachers and administrations must ultimately decide, but Ms. Kinkead finds nothing wrong with enabling youngsters to interact with digital literature. After all, youngsters are still exercising their minds, and the impulses they receive from the screen are quite similar to those they would receive from a book.

It was fascinating to read that the appearance of LGBT people may be the ultimate frontier, the final taboo for children's literature to break. In a genre that contains "adult" issues like suicide, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and alcoholism, among others, it's worth noting that there are just a few American children's books that address parallel sexual orientations and members of such groups. The majority of existing literature revolves around themes such as "dad has a roommate" or "I have two mommies," and protagonists' own sexual awakenings and realizations are rarely included in the scheme of things. As a result, it appears that children's literature as a whole would greatly benefit from an increase.

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