

The Children's Crusade:

Jan Susina, Focus Editor

For many adults, including many fairly bookish ones, the term children's literature remains an oxymoron. How can a book be both literature and for children? A text must be either one or the other. And if a book is intended for children or adolescent readers, it must be basically fluff or a thinly veiled educational tract. Or, if it turns out to be a really good book, indeed what some might consider Literature, then it is obviously really a text intended for adults.

Over the years, scholars have attempted to elevate outstanding children's books—such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, or Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*—into adult texts and disregard the books' intended audience. In the house of fiction, children's literature has long been relegated to its proper place at the kiddie's table as the great excluded. I once received a note of thanks from a successful short story writer thanking me for a copy of Chris Van Allsburg's picture book *Jumanji* noting that she thought the illustrations were fine, but she preferred big people books and that she felt "books for kids are mostly duds." True, but the same can be said for most of the big people books. To dismiss an entire genre of literature, be it women's literature, African-American literature, gay and lesbian texts, or children's literature, seems surprisingly shortsighted and just a bit parochial.

Since the discovery of childhood, which Philippe Aries in *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) would argue took place during the seventeenth century, there has been literature composed specifically for children, and some of it is remarkably good. Any literary genre

which can count as its contributors Charles Perrault, William Blake, George MacDonald, Christina Rossetti, Walter Crane, Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, Gertrude Stein, Mark Twain, Kenneth Graham, E.B. White, Jean Fritz, Maurice Sendak, and Virginia Hamilton can hardly be dismissed as a genre of duds. Since children's literature has always been concerned with the intersection of

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verbal and visual material, children's literature remains at the forefront of visual literacy.

Children's literature is perhaps in a unique situation in that it is written by adults for children. So while it may be written for their "instruction and delight," to borrow from John Newbery's famous motto which he prominently displayed as the frontispiece of his *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in 1744, children's literature also provides a fascinating source of information about what adults think children ought to be.

Children's literature also tells us as much about the adult concept of children and childhood as it does about children enjoying reading. That this concept of childhood is constantly changing is constantly revealed in children's literature and children's media. However, there is also a strong nostalgia element in children's literature; frequently adults, particularly parents, relying on their own favorite books from their childhood to give to younger readers, somehow assume the

production of children's literature ended when they stopped reading it. While aging baby-boomers may be going to theaters to see the remake of "Leave it To Beaver" in order to relive their childhood, a recent article in the *New York Times* suggests that a sizable audience for "My Best Friend's Wedding" is twelve-year-old girls. If you haven't been reading contemporary children's and adolescent literature, you may not realize what changes have occurred since the last time you spent Saturday afternoons in the children's department of your public library or local book store.

As Alison Lurie has observed in *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (1990), while run-of-the mill children's literature has always supported the status quo, the great works of children's literature have always been subversive, if not revolutionary. This trend toward subversiveness continues in the best of recent children's literature. For this Focus on Children's Literature, I have asked several established scholars working in the field of children's literature to review recent innovative or progressive books written for children or young adults. You might discover that a good children's book can appeal to both the child and the adult.

Jan Susina teaches courses in children's and adolescent literature at Illinois State University.