

# The History of British Children's Literature - An Overview

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**“A childhood without books – that would be no childhood. That would be like being shut out from the enchanted place where you can go and find the rarest kind of joy.”**

— Astrid Lindgren

## CHILDREN LITERATURE - AN OVERVIEW

Children's literature has found its roots thousands of years ago. It is considered one of the most prominent doorways through which a child is first introduced and exposed to the real world. Children Literature is defined as a good quality of books designed for children right from birth to adolescence. Due to its oral tradition, it is difficult to trace the origin of the first children's story. Children's literature across the globe has enjoyed wide acceptance and popularity among children right from the dawn of human civilization. Children enjoy adventurous, fast moving and easy to correlate stories which they can read independently. Children literature is a complete entity of dynamism and is a conglomeration of pleasure, reflection and emotion for the readers.

There is complete similarity in the pattern of development of children's literature all round the world. In the beginning era of literature there were not specific books exclusively targeted to children. Gradually, text books for the purpose of education or for the purpose of courtesy came into existence. Children were taking adult books that appeal to them once they start learning. Printed books in any society focussed on the traditional story that is appealing to all age groups (quoted in Ray, 2004). Religious books, poetry, ballads and nursery rhymes were part of early ages of children literature. As a developmental process, books specifically written for children began to appear with variety of novel ideas and special interest subjects for the benefit of children. In Europe this evolution has taken more

than five hundred years to reach the stage of printed children literature.

Literature includes not only novels, but also certain stories, letters, biographies, and history. Besides that, literature also includes the oral tradition, legends, myths and sages from classical times. Literature further includes the living tradition of children's games, songs and stories (Hunt, 1994: 3). Peter Hunt, one of Britain's most distinguished Children's Literature scholars offered this definition:

“Children's Literature consists of texts that consciously or unconsciously address particular constructions of the child, or metaphorical equivalents in terms of character or situation, the commonality being that such texts display an awareness of children's disempowered status – whether controlling, questioning or overturning it. Adults are as engaged in this discourse as children, engaging dialogically with it – reading it/writing it – just as children engage with many adult discourses. But it is how these texts are read and used that will determine their success as Children's Literature.” (Hunt, 2005)

The history of British children literature has a long and distinguished history. Getting into the depth and breadth of the British Literature, the resonance effect of literature on the Children can be traced back to the middle ages. The end of 18th century can be marked as children's literature era. It started flourishing as a separate and secure part of publishing industry in Britain. As many as fifty children's books were printed during that time in London. At the beginning of the century, children read books which they liked but not designed for them. There were fables, fairy tales, long romantic chivalric were available for children to study, but the style of literature was adult based.

The first half of 18th century moved from instructional and religious agenda to rhymes and

riddles marked for children such as *A Little Book for Little Children* (1712). The turning point was in 1740s, where cluster of London publishers printed out new books designed to instruct and delight young readers. Apart from the scholars like Newbery, other contributing factors were a growth in the middle class, book production technology, new educational theories and attitudinal change among children. Irrespective of the reasons, 18th century marked a boom in children literature.

It was the 19th century which laid the foundation for Children Literature in Britain. It was during this period where there was increasing trend in population and educational opportunities. The Victorian Era witnessed the fine flowering of children's literature on both sides of the Atlantic. The most outstanding work *Tales From Shakespeare* was published by Charles and Mary Lamb. This book served to introduce the stories of the great plays to generations of young readers. By mid-century several of England's prolific writers of adult literature turned their attention to books of children. Charles Kingsley's fantasy *The Water Babies* was published in 1863. Charles Dicken's *Christmas Carol* appeared in 1843. His fantasy *The Magic Fishbone* was quite popular among children. Besides William Makepeace Thackeray wrote and illustrated *The Rose and the Ring* in 1855, a nonsensical fairy tale. English fairy tales both original, and traditional appeared in great abundance during the second half of the 19th century. The technology of paper manufacturing associated with the printing technology boosted the literary industry. The scholar effectively utilised the opportunity in bringing out the imagination of fantasy, information and moral values in the form of books. The 20th century marked the first colour printed books for children. British took the lead in developing new kind of literature which is focussed on children. The potential piety of all individuals, including children was first recognised by puritans. This led to printing of books of retelling myths, educational, religious books for children gradually migrated to books for engaging and entertaining children at all stages of their development.

Now in the 21st Century, Children's Literature is genuinely global. It is vibrant, using multiple voices, perspectives and languages. Children's Literature is now more ambiguous, noncommittal, colorful and diversified than ever before. Children's Literature of

the 21st century can encourage young readers to think optimistically about the future and to consider the pioneering roles they could play in improving society for all.

#### REFERENCE

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