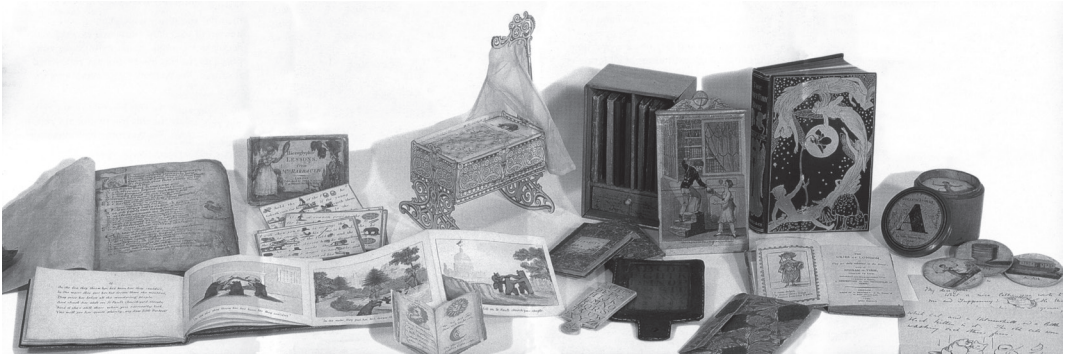


# Panorama of Youth

Toronto librarian LESLIE MCGRATH introduces the holdings of one of Canada's most significant collections of children's literature, the Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books



Aesopus moralatus, manuscript, 14th century; Mure's Story of the Three Bears, manuscript, 1831; Barbauld's Hieroglyphic Lessons, ca. 1815; Waterson cot, ca. 1873; Pretty Book for Children, circa 1745; Book Case of Instruction, 1813; Hornbook (primer), ca. 1750; Hornbook, ca. 1800; Imperial Battledore, by J. Newbery, ca. 1750; Cries of London, by E. Newbery, 1799; Grandmother's Alphabet, ca. 1825; Beatrix Potter, manuscript letter, 1930; Lang's Violet Fairy Book, 1901.

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN always seem to attract significant interest, whether among those with children or those remembering their own childhoods. Jonathan Shipley's survey of some of the notable U.S. collections of children's literature appeared in *Amphora* 155, and earlier this year Gail Edwards and Judith Saltman published their own survey of children's literature in Canada, *Picturing Canada: A History of Canadian Children's Illustrated Books and Publishing* (see review, page 35).

One of the key sources of illustrations for *Picturing Canada* was the Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books at the Toronto Public Library, a collection that spans the history of English-language children's literature. Holdings range far and wide, from cuneiform tablets over 3,000 years old through a 14th-century manuscript of Aesop's fables on vellum and 16th-century books of courtesy. A variety of early Puritan works, 18th-century chapbooks, moral tales and rational recreations, Victorian classics of fantasy, adventure and school stories as well as modern notable books (with an emphasis

on Canadiana) round out the collection.

Within the collection are Florence Nightingale's childhood library, Queen Mary's collection of children's books, the Pettingell Collection of periodicals and penny dreadfuls, and an extensive collection of Big Little Books. The Osborne's extensive popular materials and novelties, including miniatures and movable books, illustrate a wide variety of appealing book formats; realia, such as blocks for printing, help to document changes in the technology of book production.

Established in 1949 by a gift of books from the British librarian Edgar Osborne, the Osborne Collection is the oldest and most extensive collection of early children's books in Canada. Visitors to Osborne may trace developments in the aesthetics of children's book design and illustration as a reflection not only of advances in methods of printing and binding, but in educational trends, shifting economies and expanding markets. They may also see the introduction of artistic and literary threads from many cultures into the appearance and content of the books.

The Osborne Collection is kept in closed stacks. Visitors who wish to use materials are asked to read and follow safe handling guidelines, and to fill out a reader's card. The materials they request are then brought to the Reading Room. Nearly all book materials are listed in the library's online catalogue, [www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/osborne](http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/osborne); other materials like book art and archives can be requested from lists or by consultation with a librarian.

With over 80,000 items in the collection, some researchers spend pleasant days working at Osborne. Their materials are kept safely and conveniently at hand for the duration of the project. Visitors are also encouraged to check the catalogue and send call numbers for their requests in advance. This can save valuable time for research, and if quiet study time is needed, can help in planning visits around classes and group tours.

At the library we are frequently asked about reproductions. Inexpensive basic scans may be taken of some items by staff, using our face-up scanner. Publication-quality images of Osborne materials can be requested from the Preservation and Digitization Department. Prices and formats are listed on the Toronto Public Library website under Collection Reproduction Services, [www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/using-the-library/computer-services/reproduction-services](http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/using-the-library/computer-services/reproduction-services). Patrons may also consult staff about taking their own non-flash digital images of Osborne books, which may be permitted, depending on the condition of the item.



In the early hand press period, when children's books were neither plentiful nor cheap, woodcut illustrations ranged from sober admonitory emblems in instructional works, framed in elegant blackletter, to crude little chapbook comics, frequently mismatched to the text. (see Fig. 1)

Such plain beginnings, whose only occasional touch of colour was applied by hand, influenced new styles that technological enhancements in printing, illustration and binding made possible. One of the most striking features of children's publishing, and that which is most commented upon by visitors to the Osborne Collection, is its variety. No other field offers such scope for imaginative content and presentation, nor for the exploitation of a successful model. Wood engraving, copperplate designs, aquatints and early colour processes are all represented in children's books, to be superseded by lithographic and modern computerized forms of reproduction. Yet in early and modern books, classic book art has as timeless an appeal as the texts it illustrates. (see Fig. 2)

In every age, some of the most gifted designers and illustrators turned their attention to children's books, exploring to the fullest the themes of fairy tales, legends and adventure. Every trend admired in the adult book design industry can be found in children's books, but adult solemnity is often absent, as in Walter Crane's designs that encompass binding, endpapers, text and illustrations.

The Osborne Collection offers examples of bindings through the ages, featuring a wide variety of publishers' bindings as well as modest bindings produced during periods of austerity such as wartime. The lurid bindings of chapbooks and those of comics are not absent, and contrast with those of outstanding modern art.

George Walker's binding for *Alice in Wonderland* plays "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," while that of *Through the Looking-Glass* has a built-in chessboard, studded with mirrors. The hard-to-shelve *Slant Book* always stands out (at an angle), while the set of first editions of Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, bound by the London fine binding firm Asprey in purple levant morocco spangled with stars, illuminates the shelf.

The history of children's book design is interwoven with changing ideas about the child,



*This example of an early Latin textbook offers a picture of the contemporary schoolroom, in which the Master brandishes a bundle of switches before a group of schoolboys, who recite their grammar lessons. From Compendium Octo Partiu Ozonum (Argentine [Strasbourg]: Matthia Hupfuf, 1505). Goody Two Shoes' Picture Book by Walter Crane, containing "Goody Two Shoes," "Beauty and the Beast," "The Frog Prince" and "An Alphabet of Old Friends" (London: George Routledge & Sons, [1874]).*

on education, on child-rearing, and on the propriety of imaginative literature. The cycles of fashion that bring fairy tales in and out of favour are illustrated through the appearance of the books children were given: today's poor cousin in a tawdry cover may be next year's glamour gift for the rich. Children hold on to their treasures, but these may nonetheless fall victim to wear, spring cleaning or younger siblings.

In short, the Osborne provides a panorama of children's books throughout history, and whether the researcher wishes to do a careful study of an illustrative school or simply to revisit a half-remembered childhood memory, the books in mind are likely to be here. Visitors come from around the world and include many notable scholars, authors and illustrators, as well as bibliophiles who come for sheer enjoyment.

Many special accomplishments are the result of work by the Friends of the Osborne and Lillian H. Smith Collections, established in

1966, arguably the oldest library Friends group in Canada—and possibly in North America. The Friends, over 500 in membership, in liaison with the Children's Books History Society of England, work to promote awareness of Osborne and its holdings, and have raised large sums for acquisitions, cataloguing and conservation. They have established endowment funds for annual lectures and special purchases: Helen E. Stubbs as a bequest in 1994, and Jane Dobell, as a memorial to Sybille Pantazzi in 2007.

~ Leslie McGrath is head of the Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books at the Toronto Public Library, Toronto, Ontario. The Osborne Collection is located on the fourth floor of the Lillian H. Smith branch of the Toronto Public Library, 239 College Street, Toronto, ON. Hours are 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays, closed Sundays and holidays. Admission is free.