

From Pilgrim's Progress to Peter Cottontail

JONATHAN SHIPLEY takes a playful romp through the history of children's literature in this profile of contemporary collections, collectors and booksellers that specialize in this enduring and universal genre.



Images courtesy of the Arne Nixon Center for the Study of Children's Literature.

IT DIDN'T START WITH CAPTAIN Underpants. It didn't start with *Artemis Fowl* or Harry Potter or *The Polar Express*. Children's literature began long before a series of unfortunate events, centuries before Madeleine, the schoolgirl, had adventures in Paris and Babar the elephant left the jungle for the big city. Long before Hans Brinker put on silver skates, before kids stumbled into a wardrobe into Narnia, before Hobbits journeyed through Middle Earth and two boys named Hardy solved mysteries, children's books flourished.

PUBLIC, PRIVATE AND PRECIOUS

The University of Washington knows this. Their Historical Children's Literature Collection has over 3,000 volumes chronicling the history of reading and the changing definition of childhood. The Arne Nixon Center for the Study of Children's Literature knows it. The centre, at California State

University, Fresno, is one of North America's leading resources for the study of children's literature. The University of Minnesota knows it too. Ditto the Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature at the University of Florida.

Antiquarian booksellers know it. The Children's Book Gallery in San Francisco specializes in rare and collectible children's literature. One of their recent catalogues offered a multitude of treasures, from Gelett Burgess's *Blue Goops and Red* to Alice Gomme's *Children's Singing Games with Tunes to Which They Are Sung*. Hobbyhorse Books in Ho Ho Kus, New Jersey, sells antiquarian children's books as well, including chapbooks from the 1800s, early primers, classic fiction and more. Aleph-Bet Books, in Pound Ridge, New York, owned by Helen and Marc Younger, specializes in fine first editions of children's and illustrated books too.

In sum, a wide array of antiquarian booksellers know that children's literature is something that should be collected, studied, marvelled over, appreciated, read alone quietly or read enthusiastically aloud to a group of enraptured tots.

Private collectors know it too. There's a simple beauty in a children's book—not just the illustration, whether by Tasha Tudor or Arthur Rackham, Shel Silverstein or William Steig, and not just the words, whether by Hans Christian Andersen or Roald Dahl, but the book itself. A children's book is a testament from those innocent days, for readers and collectors alike, of first being able to read, of that first discovery of different people and places and things, of that transportation to wherever the next page leads the reader—down the Mississippi with Huckleberry Finn or up a tall tower with Rapunzel.

Pat McNally is a Harvard grad and was a punter and receiver for the NFL team the Cincinnati Bengals for nearly a decade. Recently he put up for auction his immense children's literature collection. He owned *Mother Goose in Prose* by L. Frank Baum, the first book that mentions a certain girl from Kansas named Dorothy Gale. He owned *Through the Looking-Glass*—an autographed copy by Alice Liddell, the real Alice that inspired Lewis Carroll's tale now splashed on the big screen with Johnny Depp. He owned *Stuart Little* autographed by E.B. White and Beatrix Potter's personal copy of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

Seattle's Pamela Harer is another avid collector. Living in downtown Seattle, she's been collecting for over 30 years. Most of the books in the University of Washington's collection are hers. The collection has a sampling of 18th-century children's books. Stories proved, back then, that good

children were rewarded. Virtuousness was a vital goal. Bad children were punished, often by death. Not quite *Goodnight Moon*. Tales like *Sandford and Merton* were popular in those times, as was *Goody Two-Shoes*. Chapbooks and pamphlets were also read by youngsters, usually tales of noble knights and fairy tales. Kids' books go back further than the 19th century, however, though books published specifically for children did begin to take root then.

Another rich repository of children's literature

is the Baldwin Library in Gainesville, Florida. It contains 100,000 volumes. The library's Web site reveals, "Obedient miniature adult, mischievous free spirit, or mini-consumer—the image of the child in society has changed

many times over the past three hundred years." It continues, "The books given to children are meant to mold or train the young mind to the values of their elders. For this reason, children's literature is often more reflective of the adult society than the intended readers."

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE BIBLE

The first book available to children was undoubtedly the Bible. Filled with stories of saints and sinners, martyrs and men of the cloth, the book taught children right and wrong, good and bad. Bestiaries, books about exotic animals, were also one of the first type of books to be placed in the hands of youngsters. These early books were influenced by the conservative religious beliefs of the day. Children, in a way, were beasts to those who printed the books, pamphlets and ephemera. They were wild heathen savages needing to be taught and shaped into moral beings. The children were in the dark, and the tales given to them shed light on the fact that they

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knew nothing and would *be* nothing if they did not conform to the rules of society. Creativity and imagination in these early books did not exist. Moral lessons were taught. Do good or be damned.

Many books in the 17th and 18th centuries were not specifically intended for children, yet the language and adventures they contained enthralled them and turned them into readers. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is one such example. It was first published in 1678, and the Baldwin Library has 100 different copies of it. Daniel Defoe's *Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner* was first published in 1719. Soon after it was rewritten and republished for younger audiences.

John Newbery was the first commercial publisher of children's books, making them a sustainable and profitable segment of the publishing market. The England native published *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in 1744. Aiming to instruct, it also entertained youngsters with rhymes and pictures. Possibly written by the poet Oliver Goldsmith, *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* was published by Newbery in 1765. It is one of the first pieces of fiction aimed at simply amusing children.

Of course, long before Newbery, fables and fairy tales were born. Aesop's tales were written down as early as the 4th century. An edition printed in 1474, mere decades after Gutenberg invented the mechanical printing press, still exists. Again, though not intended for children specifically, the fables told simple stories and moral lessons that could be easily gleaned by the young. Likewise, fairy tales were passed down orally generation upon generation. In 17th-century France, Charles Perault was the

first to collect and print tales we all know well—*Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood*.

A BLOSSOMING IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Not until the 1800s did children's literature begin to flourish and proliferate. Childhood was then valued. A child's mind was not an empty dark cavern to be filled with moral platitudes and frightening damnation, but a place where wonder and imagination could grow. Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* was published in 1846. John Ruskin's *King of the Golden River* made its debut in 1841, and the tales of Hans Christian Andersen were widely read. Though instruction, moral and otherwise, continued to be read, so did poetry (*The Butterfly's Ball*, by William Roscoe), pop-ups (*To Market We Will Go*) and fiction (*The Wonderful Leaps of Sam Patch*).

The 20th century brought much of what today's reader would consider the classics of children's literature. The century was bookended by *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, published in 1900, and a very different sort of wizard, Harry Potter, whose tales skyrocketed their author J.K. Rowling to instant fame and wealth. Tarzan was

born in the 20th century. So was Nancy Drew. Peter Rabbit came out of his hole, and a little house was on the prairie. Narnia came to fruition, Peter Pan learned to fly, and a frog and a toad heard wind in the willows.

"We are all children," states Angelica Carpenter, the curator of the Arne Nixon Center for the Study of Children's Literature. "Shared stories give us insights and backgrounds that endure for generations." The stories the centre has are many, including 2,000 books by or related to



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Lewis Carroll. "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," Carpenter notes, "published in 1865, was a breath of fresh air, a sophisticated book written to amuse child readers." Amusing, too, are the 6,000-plus cat books in the centre's collection, mostly picture books from the four corners of the globe.

Carpenter, when not busy at the college, is busy curating her own private collection. "I love the books I inherited from my family," she says, "especially my mother's Oz books." Carpenter is the first president of the International Wizard of Oz Club. "The Oz books of L. Frank Baum live in my head and heart."

Chris Loker, the owner of Children's Book Gallery in San Francisco, has her heart in the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. But she says children's books "were always a love of mine. I had a mother who read to me." So, in 2006, she

opened the Children's Book Gallery, focusing entirely on fine and rare books from 1750 to 1950.

Instruct, enlighten, entertain: These are the pillars of children's literature. Whether it's *Winning His Way* (1883), a boy's adventure book set in the Civil War, or Stephanie Meyer's latest vampire novel; a book by Carolo Collodi about a wooden boy named Pinocchio or Chris Van Allsburg's *Jumanji*, the stories live in institutions and on bookstore shelves, in the book-lined studies of collectors, and in the hearts and minds of those who read and cherish them. Carpenter notes, "Books about people like ourselves help us understand ourselves." Books about people or wily rabbits or heroic wizards or cowardly lions: all are mirrors in which we see reflected who we are.

~ Jonathan Shipley is a freelance writer based on Vashon Island, Washington.

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