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Introduction

Kimberley Reynolds

Why research children’s literature?

Since all adults were once children and stories for children have been produced in the ‘childhoods’ of most cultures, revisiting writing for children as an adult can be illuminating at a variety of levels, from the personal to the national. Rereading as an adult a book that was loved or that was found perplexing in childhood can facilitate exploration of the child a person was; in the same way, because books for children are often used to teach the prevailing values and accepted behaviours of a particular time, studying the books produced – or suppressed – in earlier periods or at key moments in the history of a nation can highlight telling elements and debates from those times. For instance, under the fascist Franco regime in Spain (1939–1975) many traditional forms of storytelling and writing for children were banned as subversive – sometimes because they kept alive stories of national heroes discredited by that regime, sometimes because they validated religious beliefs and bodies that were officially banned, and so on. Subsequently there has been considerable work to recover lost and suppressed material, reshaping it for post-Franco generations of Spanish children. The children’s literature that was produced during the Franco years tells its own story, too, of course.

The Franco government clearly understood that, because children’s literature is one of the earliest ways in which we encounter stories, it plays a powerful role in shaping how we think about and understand the world. Stories are key sources of the images, vocabularies, attitudes, structures and explanations we need to contemplate experience; because they are often bound up with education of one kind or another they can be important carriers of information about changes in culture, present and past. Indeed, because of its long history and because writing for children straddles the domestic and institutional, official and unofficial, high and mass cultures, and often includes visual elements, material written for children can be a particularly valuable repository of historical information about everything from how children in the past looked and the environments they occupied to shops, servants, the treatment of disease, religion, wars, migration, scientific development, exploration and much more.

Children’s literature’s links to the past work at multiple levels, too. Just as the children we once were continue to exist inside and to affect us, so writing produced for children continues to resonate over time and to be implicated in
the way we conceive, organize and manage societies. This is not a straightforward process; traditional ideas may be preserved in earlier texts, or deliberately promoted in conservative contemporary works or in those that uncritically hold up a mirror to current social trends. At the same time, many of the stories we tell children today are in fact retellings of quite old stories, but, instead of transmitting older values, their writers and illustrators set out to reveal, critique and adjust the schemata by which we interpret the world (Stephens, 2009). The dialogue they create between old and new ways of thinking can be another way to sow the seeds of social change (see Bradford et al., 2008; Dixon, 1977; Reynolds, 2007). A good example of children's literature as a seedbed for change can be seen in the areas of equality and diversity. In English-language writing for children by Indian writers writing in India and the diaspora, for instance, many stories promote the idea of what has been termed the ‘new Indian girl’, both representing girl characters as effective, admirable and powerful – characteristics that go against the grain of traditional images of girls in Indian writing – and encouraging qualities such as commonality and inclusion more generally (see Superle, 2009).

This short overview suggests a number of reasons why research in children's literature can be rewarding and significant – reasons that are sometimes overlooked by those who have not explored the field. Certainly the reception of children's literature studies in universities has been mixed; individuals and institutions sometimes assume that writing for children is too simple and too closely associated with popular culture to warrant serious academic scrutiny. Precisely the characteristics that for some have devalued children's literature as an area of study have intrigued influential figures, over the years. Both Samuel Pepys and James Boswell collected *chapbooks*, the Grimm brothers' work on fairy tales was part of a more general study of the German national culture, while the philosopher Walter Benjamin was a committed collector of children's books. Benjamin valued children's literature in part for its potential to radicalize rising generations, encouraging them to resist established ways of thinking promoted through formal schooling. He was working at a time when artists across Europe were alert to the affinities between children's literature and popular culture, and this mass appeal was regarded as enhancing the rejuvenating but fugitive nature of childhood as it was figured in Modernism (see Dusinberre, 1987; Reynolds, 2007 and 2010), making it a vital area of consideration for those thinking about and attempting to reorient culture. Typically, Benjamin was ahead of his time; it has taken the best part of a century for academia to recognize children's literature as an important and a rewarding field of research that has much to say to many other areas of literary and cultural studies, and which offers considerable scope for original research and thinking based on material that has never previously been discussed.
What do researchers in children's literature study?

Those starting research in children's literature today will find that it is now a dynamic part of teaching and research in higher education institutions in many countries. Over the past decade there has been a proliferation of university courses dedicated to children's literature, contributing to significant expansion of children's literature as an area of research, supervision and teaching. Although enthusiasm for and activities (courses, conferences, publications) around children's books and related materials are great, often students and academics who find themselves entering the field from other disciplines are uncertain about what constitutes research in children's literature and how it might be undertaken. Since many of those who turn their attention to research in this field have already studied literature to degree level and so can be expected to be familiar with a range of critical and theoretical approaches for studying literary texts, this sense of uncertainty can presumably be attributed to the word ‘children's'. What exactly is it that is being studied and where (if at all) do children come into the research? Such questions arise in part from the fact that in other areas of literary studies similar labels tend to be associated with creation: women's writing is written by women; post-colonial literature largely by those from countries that were formerly colonized, and so on. Children, however, rarely write the kinds of materials, be they books, comics, magazine, films, plays, TV programmes or any of the other myriad narrative forms that are grouped under the heading ‘children's literature', so in this case the label indicates that what is being studied is a body of writing for, rather than by, children.

While this basic understanding begins to set some parameters around the body of material that makes up children's literature, it does not explain how it is organized or what researchers in the field do, or how they go about it. The answers to these questions are, again, far from straightforward; for instance, while many academic disciplines are defined by periods and movements (medieval, Romantic, Modernist, Aesthetic), place (American, Russian), genre (Gothic, detective), approach (feminist, post-colonial) or even limited to the writing of a single individual, the study of children's literature encompasses all such approaches and adds some more, not least because many of those who have traditionally been drawn to this field have come from backgrounds in education, librarianship and child development, each of which has its own disciplinary agendas. As its title indicates, this book is primarily intended for those who are studying children's literature as literature and so paying attention to such things as style, context and critical approaches rather than focusing on its pedagogic, developmental or literacy functions; nevertheless, this
is intrinsically an interdisciplinary field, and interfaces with other areas of research are often both unavoidable and enriching.

The breadth of children's literature extends beyond disciplinary eclecticism. The history of writing for children stretches back to classical antiquity (see Lerer, 2008) and earlier, to the myths, legends, rhymes, folk and fairy tales originating in preliterate epochs. It also takes account of contemporary and emerging trends, including narratives for children created in cyberspace, sometimes by children themselves, which potentially call into question the notion that children's literature is written by those who are not children. Since children's literature encompasses every form, format, genre and medium, has been produced in all parts of the world, is often highly dependent on visual elements, and frequently needs to take into account ways in which stories for children are taken up by those creating toys, games and merchandise, it is perhaps the largest and most varied area of literary research. This means those researching children's literature may need to be familiar with an eclectic range of research strategies. One function of this book is to introduce some of the most frequently used approaches to researching children's literature; before doing so, however, there is more to say about what exactly is being studied, and particularly the relationship between the two terms 'children' and 'literature'.

The child(ren) in children's literature

The term 'children's' immediately raises questions about which children are being studied: child characters in the texts? Child readers? If the latter, are these actual readers whose responses will be investigated, or implied readers, constructed in the narrative? And, when dealing with a book from the past, which real readers? The original children for whom a book was intended? Its current readers? Or both? How old are these children? Does age matter? What do age ranges/generalizations mean? In Britain, children's literature currently might be said to cater for those from 0 to 16 (that is, from birth to the age when a young person is legally able to leave school), but this varies from country to country and has also changed over time. Unsurprisingly, the needs, abilities and experiences of this group vary tremendously on age grounds alone, but also because it incorporates children of both sexes, children from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, children who are physically and educationally challenged or intellectually gifted, children who are prepubescent and those who are not only well into adolescence but also sexually active, children who live in the countries where they were born in traditional nuclear families and children – some separated from their families – who have migrated to new countries for a variety of reasons and who are having to negotiate both a
new culture and a new language. This list is by no means exhaustive. Since it is rarely possible to make meaningful generalizations about the whole body of writing for children – not forgetting that a great deal of what children read falls into the category of non-fiction or information books, from ABCs to ‘horrible histories’ – researchers often find themselves specializing in writing for a particular age group such as preschool children or adolescents.

The plethora of potential readers are all legally minors, setting up expectations that writers, publishers, reviewers and those who bring children and books together have a duty of care to their readers. This is another area that has raised interesting, often quite contentious, questions about what constitutes children’s literature: what is and is not suitable for children in terms of content and language or what they do and do not need to know. Who decides this? Can a book that includes, say, incest, gang rape, attempted infanticide and abortion really be ‘for children’? What about one in which the central character, a child who is unquestionably kind, good and innocent, is killed by ‘friendly fire’ at the end of a war and the incident is only witnessed by readers? Or a picturebook that explores the emotions of a father mourning the sudden death of his teenage son? These are all examples taken from books published for children in the last three decades, each of which contributes to debates about what constitutes ‘children’s literature’.\(^1\) Such controversies are not new: in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for instance, there were strong disagreements about such things as whether or not it was suitable to give children fairy stories and fantasy (see Tucker, 1976). Reaching a decision about what is and is not ‘children’s literature’ is complicated by the fact that understanding of what childhood is, how long it lasts, how definitions of childhood are affected by factors such as class, place, race and wealth, and what children’s literature is for have changed considerably over time. This means that researchers working on, for example, Puritan or eighteenth-century or Soviet children’s literature need to be historians of specific periods and childhood as well as literary critics, while those researching topics such as representations of home, or death and dying, or place in children’s literature may need to develop knowledge about childhood and writing/illustrating for children across several periods and disciplines and even across countries.

**Literature for children**

Despite the difficulties of defining its audience’s range and breadth, over the years some agreement about what makes a book ‘for children’ has been reached, though even here the ground is not always firm. For instance, do books that find favour with children, though they were not initially written for them, become children’s books – or, indeed, if a book written for children...
becomes popular with adults, does it cease to belong to the domain of children’s literature? Whole studies are now being written on the subject of such ‘crossover’ fictions and their implications for children’s literature (Beckett, 2008; Falconer, 2009). Perhaps the most universally accepted advice about how to determine whether or not something should be classified as ‘children’s literature’ is that given by John Rowe Townsend, who in 1971 concluded that ‘...any line which is drawn to confine children’s books to their own special corner is an artificial one...the only practical definition of a children’s book today...is a book which appears on the children’s list of a publisher’ (in Hunt, 1990: 57).

Townsend’s advice may be practical, but is it right? Many researchers in the field find it helpful to look closely at how children’s texts are written and the relationship between child readers and narrators; the work of Zohar Shavit (1986) and Barbara Wall (1991) has been influential for this kind of analysis. A more general attempt to identify key components of writing for children was put forward by Myles McDowell in a frequently quoted article about fiction for children. McDowell concludes that, when compared with adult fiction,

Children’s books are usually shorter, they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism...children’s books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order; probability is often discarded; and one could go on endlessly talking of magic, fantasy, simplicity, and adventure. (1976: 141–142)

Evidence that much of what McDowell says is true of a great deal of writing for children has been provided by the Danish scholar, Torben Weinreich, whose research into what happens to adult texts when they are adapted for children concludes that the process invariably involves making works shorter, plots simpler and possibly adding illustrations. Does this mean that writing for children is intrinsically inferior to writing for adults? The assumption that this is so has impacted on the status of writing for children, which has battled against the prejudice that the nature of its audience dooms it to be simplistic and of questionable literary merit. Undoubtedly much of what has been published for young readers – and the same could be said of much that is published for adults – does lack literary merit if this is equated exclusively with stylistically admirable, richly layered, metaphorically resonant texts. The reasons for this are many, but in the case of children’s literature there are some differences from sub-literary writing for adults, foremost of which is the way children’s writing is often co-opted for pedagogic/didactic purposes. This does
not mean that writing for children is innately or inevitably inferior to – or easier to produce – than writing for adults, any more than it means that all adult books are good books. Indeed, Jill Paton Walsh, who writes for both children and adults, argues that to write a good book for children is more difficult than writing for adults, and, therefore, when a children’s book is successful in terms of both literary merit and appeal, it is peculiarly affecting and aesthetically significant. Children’s books, she says,

...present a technically more difficult, technically more interesting problem [than writing for adults] – that of making a fully serious adult statement, as a good novel of any kind does, and making it utterly simple and transparent.... The need for comprehensibility imposes an emotional obliqueness, and indirection of approach, which like elision and partial statement in poetry, is often a source of aesthetic power. (1977: 192–193)

Compelling though Paton Walsh’s argument is, the sense behind both McDowell and Weinreich’s views of what constitutes children’s literature (that it is simpler, child-orientated, optimistic and so on) would have been familiar to the writers, editors and publishers who produced the vast majority of the material that has been regarded as being ‘for children’ in the past. Until the late twentieth century they had their own unwritten ethical code that prohibited sex, bad language, and depressive endings (Reynolds, 1998: 31; Tucker, 2006); to a large extent this code shaped the challenges to which Paton Walsh refers. Undoubtedly the expansion of writing for teenagers (Young Adult fiction) has been instrumental in challenging ideas about what children’s literature is and does; there are now many stylistically complex children’s books that include sex, swearing and violence, and that end bleakly.

Current trends may be expanding the definition of what constitutes children’s literature (and so changing the challenges faced by writers and illustrators), but this new, more radical writing and illustration exist alongside the accumulated body of writing for young readers, which continues to be a significant area of research activity, adding to the large and mutable body that is labelled ‘children’s literature’ and the opportunities it offers those who are researching it.

Why a specialist research methods handbook?

By now it should be clear that there are a number of specific challenges for those working in the field of children’s literature which mean that not everything new researchers in the field need or want to know will be found in the many excellent guides to research in the humanities that already exist. To that
end we have tried to make this book serve double duty in that it provides both
general advice (though always in the context of children’s literature) about
embarking on research and specific advice about how to respond to some of
the issues and challenges that may arise in the course of research in the area of
children’s literature. Experienced researchers will not want to spend time on
the basics, but the practical advice about the field and the research resources
in it will be of use to most who are new to the field.

It should be remembered that often the challenges that make it useful to
have a special book about children’s literature research are part of what makes
it such an exciting area in which to research. For instance, a great many
aspects of children’s literature have received very little formal attention, and,
while this means on the one hand that many of the basic tools of twenty-first
century researchers (electronic databases, search engines, digitized primary
resources available online, online catalogues) have been developed without
taking children’s literature into account, on the other it means that there is
considerable scope to be a research pioneer and work with materials that have
never before been written about. All of the contributors to this book have
researched and taught in the field for many years, and reading their advice
will save you time and instil good practice, whether this is about using data-
bases and electronic resources, working with visual materials, employing par-
ticular critical approaches, comparing materials from different countries and
periods or any of the other challenges discussed above.

Although very little in the way of a discrete vocabulary for discussing chil-
dren’s books has been coined by children’s literature researchers and critics,
terminology devised for other purposes has often been adapted for use when
discussing writing and illustration for children. The glossary at the end of this
book provides definitions for frequently used terms of this sort. Words that
are explained in the glossary appear in **bold** in this text.

The chapters that follow do not follow a template. Each contributor has
thought about the best way to explain and provide examples of specific areas
of research in the field. One common feature is that every chapter ends with
a list of works that will help you to develop ideas and strategies that you want
to use in your research. Most chapters (for some this would not be appropri-
ate) also include practical exercises to help you apply the ideas you have been
reading about so that you can capture them and see how they could be useful
in your research. All of the contributions in Section 5, which deals with criti-
cal approaches to children’s literature, have such exercises, and one thing that
quickly becomes apparent when the majority of these critical approaches are
applied to texts published for children before 1950 is that the adult expecta-
tions that were most fully taken into account by those involved in producing
texts for children were those of white, middle-class parents and educators who
(in the West, at least) were implicitly positioned as Christian and heterosexual. This means that, historically, childhoods in children’s books tended to be for, and largely about, such children despite the fact that they have always been a privileged minority. When this tendency came under scrutiny in the 1960s and 1970s, it resulted in significant changes in the kinds of children represented and addressed in writing for children, proof that there can be a powerful relationship between theory and practice. Of course, this relationship is not as direct as this summary makes it sound, but as you work through the theories and possibly use them as the basis for your own examination of the relationship between an area of critical thinking that interests you and writing/illustration for the young, it is worth keeping it in mind and looking for ways in which interactions between critical and creative practice have helped to expand the range of childhoods and subjects represented in writing for children.

Whether your approach is primarily theoretical, historical, stylistic or practically based, you will find that much work remains to be done in the field of children’s literature research. We hope this book will help you work effectively and point you in directions that will make your research rewarding.

**Note**

1. The books in question are Margo Lanagan’s *Tender Morsels* (2009), Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake’s *Michael Rosen’s Sad Book* (2004), and Roberto Innocenti’s *Rose Blanche* (1985; British edition told by Ian McEwan; US edition trans by Matha Coventry and Richard Craglia).

**Further reading**


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