



## WHAT SHALL MY CHILD READ?

*An expert discusses the state of children's literature. The kind of stories youngsters are asking for. Angles for parents and publishers.*

WHEN NEW MASSES invited me to write this article, I had a premonition that it could only turn out to be a pessimistic report on the state of children's literature. That was because I have long been one of that small but growing number of workers in the field who feel keenly that juveniles have with too few exceptions avoided the real, the four dimensional world of the present. Ask a librarian for a juvenile to compare in social content with *Blue Willow* or *Run, Run!*. After a desperately deep dive, she may come up with half a dozen. And yet, last Christmas at the Child Study Association book celebration, 200 youngsters spoke their hunger for books which would truthfully represent the world in which they were soon to act as adults. Specifically discussing the career stories, the consensus of opinion was that they were all to the good; but that even these purportedly all-real depictions were over generously upholstered. I have had a thirteen-year-old girl tell me that though she had liked *Blue Willow*, often described as the juvenile *Grapes of Wrath*, she thought that its author, Doris Gates, should have been honest to the last page and not blamed the suffering of the Larkins on a farm foreman.

Yes. More truth. Not only about yesterday, but particularly on the here and now. It was this consideration which depressed me when I received the assignment. I began by jotting down the titles of the eight or ten books I could possibly discuss. But soon I found myself adding the many honest, beautifully written juveniles which I had skimmed through or read during my boy's childhood. Picture books, fairy tales, folk tales and myths, fiction and biography, fact books and mysteries. And as the list grew, making an objective inventory of about 150 titles, my despondence was dissipated. And so I have arrived at this writing with high confidence that we have a fine nucleus for a children's literature and, even more important, that we have been accelerating in the right direction these last fifteen years or so.

It is not generally remembered that the business of writing and publishing for children is not much over 200 years old. Of the thousands of existent manuscripts indited and illustrated in the days before printing, only one seems intended for a child's reading, *How Babies Should Behave*. For 300 years, including the gloriously creative period of the Elizabethan writers, a few books on etiquette (In yawning howl not!), a few didactically religious books, a few books of verses recit-

ing the horrible rewards of sin, these were all that were considered necessary for the well born child. Scan this sample verse:

*When by speech I am told  
What beauty doth adorn me,  
Or in a glass when I behold  
How sweetly God did form me,  
Hath God such comeliness displayed  
And on me made to dwell:  
'Tis pity such a pretty maid  
As I should go to hell.*

Dorothy Parker? No. J. Janeway in *A Looking Glass for Children: Being a Narrative of God's Gracious Dealings with Some Little Children*.

The unfortunate youngster whose family could not afford this form of entertainment received no particularized attention until about 1590, when E. Coote invented the hornbook. True, he had had the local folk tales and the rhymes of Mother Goose by word of mouth, but nothing in print which he could call his own. The hornbook was a wooden paddle or battledore on which were inscribed the letters of the alphabet and possibly the Lord's prayer and the Invocation, the whole covered with a transparent sheet of horn and suspended from the owner's belt or neck by a string in the handle. This sturdy juvenile



An illustration by Paul Lantz from "Blue Willow."

sold in the millions right up to the nineteenth century when the bourgeois revolution caught up with it.

Already the fairy tale had made its bow in France. The philosopher Charles Perrault, stimulated by the birth of a son in his old age, had written "Cinderella," "Puss in Boots," "Sleeping Beauty," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Blue Beard," "Henny Penny and Cocky Locky": a deathless achievement. John Newbery of London set apart a corner of his dispensary for a juvenile library and proceeded to create that library by publishing over 200 titles between 1744 and 1812. His cheap books done on pulp and mostly concerned with morals, murder, and witchcraft sold for 6d., or with ball or pin cushion, for 8d. Oliver Goldsmith was one of his authors, and "Goody Two-Shoes," who helped a poor child learn to read, is still a popular heroine with children under seven years of age.

THUS through Newbery the democratic tendencies of the time began to reach out and include the children and to furnish them not only with cheap books but writing that was more free in form and more entertaining in content and, God forgive those sinners, occasionally amusing. Charles and Mary Lamb even went so far as to rewrite the tales of Shakespeare so that children too might enjoy them. The Grimm brothers and Hans Andersen set to work. A brilliant mathematician created *Alice in Wonderland*. But for the most part juveniles published in the last century were concerned with morals, religion, and manners. It was a lachrymose age. Children were supposed to weep at bad little boys and girls who were certainly destined for you-know-where, and to wait for the goody-goodys who were so pure they were invariably recruited by Heaven. Most of the few fine juveniles the century evoked were snatched out of the adult hopper. Among them were *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Little Women*, and whole shelves of Shakespeare, Dickens, Scott, Jules Verne, Jack London, the Dumas', and Conan Doyle.

Only with the turn of the century did a few talented and imaginative writers take time from their adult writing to do books specifically for children. We owe a great deal to men like Kipling and Stevenson and Walter de LaMare and A. A. Milne not only for their literary contributions to juvenile literature, but because they set new standards by proving that writing for children required

as much skill and artistic integrity as writing for the adult.

Nevertheless, as late as 1920 Annie Carroll Moore, then the highly creative Children's Librarian of the New York Public Library and still a passionate crusader for better children's books, was forced to declare that juvenile writing was still in the hands of third- and fourth-rate people turning out hundreds of semi-literate pastries, conceived with a minimum of imagination and a maximum of sentimentality and puff.

But the post world war period with its grave disillusionings caused progressive people in all fields to reexamine the basis on which a better world might conceivably arise. And since the conclusion was inescapable that the children of today are the citizens of tomorrow, many set to work to raise the levels for children in education, reading, play, and community relations. Thus without fanfare was ushered in the age of the Child. And all this concentration of attention on the child—through the progressive schools, the radical specialization of children's library work defined in separate rooms, story-telling, plays and puppet shows, the child study associations, parent-teacher groups, child psychology clinics and children's courts, professional theater and concerts for children, children's divisions in museum activity, etc.—brought about a new attitude in the publishing field as well.

Publishers began to recognize profitable opportunities in juvenile book making. For the first time, they set up autonomous departments headed by juvenile editors drawn largely from the libraries and the schools. And there were published beautiful picture books and an unending stream of well done volumes on all phases of science and industry. Writing standards climbed so that by the time the depression hit, skilled and creative writers were fast replacing the amateur practitioners once dominant in the field. The coveted John Newbery medal, the Helen Hoke prize, and later the Herald Tribune Spring Books award and the advent of the Junior Literary Guild played an important part and still do in the production of better books for children. Unquestionably, too, the cultural section of WPA with its children's theater, art classes, story-hours and play-acting clubs bringing the creative features of progressive education to the public school child, should be given credit for strengthening the mounting conviction that children are a tremendously vital portion of the nation and must be treated with imagination and honesty.

Let us briefly particularize this appraisal.

Perhaps the most significant single improvement concerns writing about the Negro people. Eva Knox Evans, a southern schoolteacher, pioneered by stripping away the pied dialect and the cartoonists curls and presenting the Negro child in a way that he could recognize himself. Arno Bontemps' *Sad-Faced Boy* lives in the real Harlem. In *Shuttered Windows*, by F. C. Means, a northern Negro girl visits her grandma in South Carolina and is forced to make Jim Crow adjustments. The

## Some Suggestions

*The following are a few books selected by Mr. Taylor as representing some of the best juvenile fiction, history, and biography of the last twenty years.*

*Railroad to Freedom*, by H. H. Swift, Harcourt, Brace. \$2.

*Other People's Houses*, by Margery Bianco, Viking. \$2.

*My Sister and I*, by Dirk van der Heide, Harcourt, Brace. \$1.

*Haym Salomon*, by Howard Fast, Messner. \$2.50.

*Simon Bolivar*, by Elizabeth Waugh, Macmillan. \$2.50.

*Down Ryton Water*, by E. R. Gaggin, Viking. \$2.

*Adventures of Misha*, by Sergei Rozanov, Stokes. \$1.75.

*Hans Sees the World*, by L. Tetzner, Covici-Friede. \$2.

*Master Simon's Garden*, by Cornelia Meigs, Macmillan. \$2.

*Abe Lincoln Grows Up*, by Carl Sandburg, Harcourt, Brace. \$2.50.

*Codfish Musket*, by A. D. Hewes, Doubleday-Doran. \$2.

*Thomas Jefferson*, by Gene Lisitsky, Viking. \$2.50.

*We the People*, by Leo Huberman, Houghton-Mifflin. \$2.

*Bend in the Road*, by M. T. Raymond, Longmans-Green. \$2.

*Key Corner*, by Eva Knox Evans, Putnam's. \$2.

*Sad-Faced Boy*, by Arno Bontemps, Houghton-Mifflin. \$2.

*Steppin and Family*, by Hope Newell, Oxford. \$2.

*Boy on Horseback*, by Lincoln Steffens, Harcourt, Brace. \$2.

*Their Weight in Wild Cats*, by James Daugherty, Houghton Mifflin. \$3.

*Blue Willow*, by Doris Gates, Viking. \$2.

*Kullu of the Carts*, by J. S. Eyton, Bobbs Merrill. \$2.50.

*Madame Curie*, by Eve Curie, Doubleday-Doran. \$4.

*Snow Treasure*, by Mary A. McSwiggan, Dutton. \$2.

*Big Ben*, by E. S. Miers, Westminster Press. \$2.50.

*Hill Doctor*, by Hubert Skidmore, Doubleday-Doran. \$2.

*Run, Run!*, by Harry Granick, Simon & Schuster. \$2.

*Shuttered Windows*, by F. C. Means, Houghton-Mifflin. \$2.

*Reading with Children*, by Anne T. Eaton, Viking. \$2.50.

inspirational and exciting life of Harriet Tubman, escaped slave, worker in the underground railroad, nurse during the Civil War, fighter for woman's suffrage, is well told by H. H. Swift in *Railroad to Freedom*. This year we have had two fictionalized biographies of notable Negroes: *Big Ben*, by E. S. Miers, the beautifully told story of Paul Robeson; and *Steppin and Family*, by Hope Newell, an

absorbing approximation of the struggles of a young Bill Robinson to learn and to earn.

A child will be quick to appreciate and to identify himself with the great American traditions of the rights of man in such books as Leo Huberman's *We the People*, still the best juvenile history of our country; Cornelia Meigs' *Master Simon's Garden*, in which three generations of Pilgrims nourish the national attitudes of flexibility and tolerance; E. R. Gaggin's *Down Ryton Water*, an unusually timely and stirring story of the Pilgrims' fight for freedom; *Codfish Musket*, by A. D. Hewes, a vigorous story of westward expansion; and James Daugherty's *Their Weight in Wild Cats*, the tall tales of Paul Bunyan, Mike Fink, John Henry, and other such legendary heroes.

Daugherty has also done fine lives of Daniel Boone and Ben Franklin. In *Haym Salomon*, Howard Fast has not only written a continuously interesting story, but successfully combats the Coughlinite slander that the Jew is alien to American life. Others among the best of American biographies are *Thomas Jefferson*, by Gene Lisitsky; *Abe Lincoln Grows Up*, by Carl Sandburg; *Boy on Horseback*, Lincoln Steffens' account of his western boyhood; and *Simon Bolivar*, by Elizabeth Waugh. Eve Curie's story of her mother, *Madame Curie*, though not written for youngsters, will be highly inspirational for the above-average thirteen-year-old.

PROBABLY the best historical fiction for children is being written by Geoffrey Trease, who sees life as a Marxist. His latest, *Cue for Treason*, though placed in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, reads like an account of today's fifth column intrigue and betrayal. Two excellent anti-Nazi books just published are *Snow Treasure*, by M. A. McSwiggan, in which two children save Norway's gold from the Nazi invaders; and Dirk van der Heide's *My Sister and I*, an actual account of the five-day invasion of Holland. If your child wishes to know something about the Soviet Union, M. Ilin's *First Primer* is by no means outdated. *Adventures of Misha*, by Sergei Rozanov, is a gay and exciting story of a little suburbanite lost in the big city of Moscow.

For reality and honesty of treatment of the contemporary social scene, I commend, besides *Blue Willow* and Harry Granick's gay *Run, Run!*, Raymond's *Bend in the Road*, the story of a factory girl; Margery Bianco's *Other People's Homes*, in which a girl becomes a domestic worker during the depression; Herbert Skidmore's *Hill Doctor*, who works among his mountain people; and a book that may be out of print and, if so, should be reissued; *Hans Sees the World*, by L. Tetzner, the story of Hans' adventures around the world in search of bread.

Finally, I would recommend for your own reading Anne T. Eaton's highly intelligent *Reading with Children*.

Yes, juvenile literature has made great strides in the last fifteen years. It is even



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big business today: its yearly lists are second only to adult fiction. And yet, it still produces too many of the over-charming, cushioned tarts of sheer piff for pelf and too few packages of the real and the present. It still continues to publish stories glorifying the slave relationships of the Old South as in *Sweet 'Possum Valley*; or an occasional book such as *They Go by Sea, They Go by Land*, in which the author subtly hobnails the features and character of the Jewish boy fortunate enough to escape the Nazis. Publishers can even depend on influential reviewers and librarians with an otherwise liberal slant to praise such books.

James Daugherty, that splendid writer and artist, has spoken for more guts and democracy in children's writing. Julia L. Sauer, Rochester librarian, in her memorable article "Making the World Safe for Janey Larkins," has pleaded eloquently for consideration of the scene which applies to eighty-five percent of our children. Progressive educators as well as the children themselves are still calling for stories that bear a direct relation to socio-economic reality. But the rate at which this wish is being gratified, though accelerating, remains a trickle.

The most important impediment to a freer flow of children's books is their price. In a population of 60,000,000 children, it is the rare book that will sell 30,000 copies. The average two-dollar tariff effectively limits sales to the \$5,000 and over income class. This group, then, often anxious to protect its children from awareness of the harsh facts of injustice and inequality borne by others, determines the content of our yearly lists. Obviously the forces which have so far been able to bring about a healthier literature are insufficiently powerful to clear this obstacle. Perhaps it is also true that some of them do not now desire to do so as ardently as they once thought they did.

Is there, then, any force not yet employed which can appreciably swing writing and editorial choice into a wider democratic channel? I believe there is such a force. It is implicit in the largest and most progressive mass organization in the country: the trade union movement of over 11,000,000 members, many of them parents.

If once the trade unions recognized that the children of today are the trade unionists of tomorrow and that in a very important measure children are daily being subjected in class room, cinema, radio, and reading matter to distortions and suppressions of the truth and the real world into which they are growing, the unions would try to correct this condition as strenuously as they seek to improve any other condition of labor. Many of the trade unionists earn enough to be book buyers at a dollar price. The larger unions have excellent educational departments. Whether through a Labor Book Club, a possibility insufficiently canvassed by writers' organizations, or by other means, the trade unions can tremendously influence the juvenile market because their membership offers publishers an

untapped field of enormous potentiality. I am assured that such a club could, on a non-profit basis, sell a two-dollar book for a dollar. Thus the organized working class would be in a position to directly indicate manuscripts for publication by reputable houses and indirectly to affect editorial policy in the entire field. Without question publishers would welcome such a development. The gain for the unions, for honesty in juvenile literature, and for the growth of our children in understanding the world into which they are moving, would be incalculable.

I think we have been rating our children at too low a mark. A child is naturally courageous, values freedom, and is a stickler for justice, equality and fair play. Let us do everything we can to treat our children honestly and to develop their instinctive desire for the truth, for reality, and for a better understanding of the here and now. They will, like the Soviet children, repay us today and the world will be better for them tomorrow.

The next significant advance in juvenile literature waits on the initiative of the trade unions. They have an obligation; but they have also an inspiring privilege!

HARRY TAYLOR.

## In the Great Tradition

NATIVE DAUGHTER; *The Story of Anita Whitney*, by Al Richmond. Anita Whitney 75th Anniversary Committee. San Francisco. \$1.

WHEN two American women—one eighty and the other a mere seventy-five—jointly celebrate their July 1942 birthdays by starting off on a strenuous cross-country tour to help smash Hitler in 1942 and to mobilize the women of America behind the job—the least excitable of our fellow citizens will admit "it's something," and will want to know how come.

*Native Daughter* answers for the younger of the team: Anita Whitney. (Her partner, Mother Bloor, has already spoken in her wonderful autobiography, *We Are Many*.) This all-too-short biography placing her life and accomplishments against her country's and her state's history for three-quarters of a century explains why Anita Whitney could not have celebrated her birthday in any other way.

Anita Whitney's long, eventful, and inspiring life began two years after the Civil War ended. *Native Daughter* excitingly proves it was anything but a placid existence. So much so, one smiles at an anecdote the book contains about Anita's vehement rejection of life in a rocking chair. The woman seated in the particular chair under discussion had a speech defect which caused her to pronounce all "k" sounds as "t," with the result that she spoke of: "O, how I like to just sit and rot and rot and rot." Another anecdote, which explains Anita Whitney at sixty-seven, is more typical. Behind the door her pride as a free American prevented her from keeping latched, we meet her—armed with an empty milk bottle, waiting for vigilantes.