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## Children's Literature: Birth, Infancy, Maturity

M. O. Grenby

29 August 2008

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It is difficult to resist the temptation to identify precisely when children's literature began. The majority of scholars have placed the start line in London in the early 1740s. This was when Thomas Boreman began publishing his 'Gigantick Histories' (1740-43) – tiny books chummily describing the sights of London – and when *A Child's New Play-Thing* (1742) – a spelling book that ended with engaging stories like 'Guy of Warwick' and 'St. George' – and *Tom Thumb's Song Book* (1744) – the earliest known collection of nursery rhymes – were issued by Thomas and Mary Cooper. Even more famous, and often seen as the first modern children's book, is *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* published by John Newbery in 1744 (fig.1). Although one critic sees it as 'the work of a thoroughly trivial, commercial, and disinherited mind,' and seethes that 'its continuing *succés d'estime* is something of a mystery', Newbery's book is important simply because his firm endured while Boreman's and Cooper's did not: Newbery and his various heirs continued producing books for children for the rest of the century.<sup>1</sup> These anonymous, almost ephemeral publications of the 1740s – what one critic has called the 'incunabula of children's literature' – looked like nothing that had been published before.<sup>2</sup> They may have been fundamentally didactic, teaching the alphabet, civic history and good behaviour, but the instruction was being contained within a framework of pictures, rhymes, riddles, jokes and stories designed to amuse children.

But saying that children's literature began in the mid-eighteenth century, and in Britain, immediately invites dissension. A case could be made for the primacy of French children's literature for example, although a lack of copyright laws, a more rigidly hierarchical society, and Jesuit domination of schools (and the chaos caused by its sudden end) inhibited its development, and it was only after Newbery that French producers made a determined effort to combine instruction and delight.<sup>3</sup> But even if we take the 'delightfulness' of Newbery's books as the basis for their significance, we

should remember that about eighty percent of his list was comprised of straightforwardly educational books (not to mention his larger range of books for adults). His *Circle of the Sciences* series (1745-48), for example, taught grammar, geography, arithmetic and so on without much to captivate the child reader. However celebrated and influential the ‘delightful’ books subsequently became – books like *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765) or his short-lived children’s periodical, *The Lilliputian Magazine* (1751-52) – Newbery’s business probably relied much more on the educational titles. In this sense, he was less a pioneer than another contributor to a long tradition, for instructive material for children had been published throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even after the 1740s, successive editions of George Fisher’s *The Instructor; or, the Young Man’s Best Companion* (1727) say, or Daniel Fenning’s *British Youth’s Instructor* (1754?), easily outsold anything that Newbery or his competitors were offering. Moreover, the line between instruction and delight in the newer type of book is often very blurred. Thomas Boreman’s first venture into the children’s book market was *A Description of Three Hundred Animals* in 1730. Even if its preface presented the book as ‘for the Entertainment of Children’, it was primarily a work of natural history (though including such fabulous beasts as the manticora and cockatrice) and offered a part anecdotal and part technical ‘Particular Account of the Whale-Fishery’.

In any case, the argument that books designed to entertain children appeared only with Newbery and his competitors in the mid-eighteenth century is pretty easy to undermine – especially if we are open-minded about exactly what child readers would find fun. François Fénelon’s *Les Aventures de Télémaque fils d’Ulysse* (1699), almost instantly translated into English, provided a popular mix of Homeric adventure and moral instruction. Isaac Watts’ *Divine Songs* (1715) was a collection of deeply religious poems, enforcing theological orthodoxy, but was couched in such amiable and sometimes whimsical verse that it would surely have been attractive to children. It is no surprise that it stayed in print throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. The same might be said for John Bunyan’s *A Book for Boys and Girls, or, Country Rhymes for Children* (1686), later known as *Divine Emblems*. It comprised a series of spiritual lessons cleverly derived from 74 short poems on familiar subjects (bees, butterflies, beggars, ‘the Boy dull at his Book’). That these emblematical poems function almost

as riddles was acknowledged by Bunyan when he said that he aimed to ‘entice’ children,

To mount their Thoughts from what are childish Toys,  
To Heav'n, for that's prepar'd for Girls and Boys.<sup>4</sup>

It is even possible to argue that some of the less obviously playful Puritanical children’s books of the later seventeenth century would, in their way, have delighted children. James Janeway’s *A Token for Children* (1671-72), which (as its subtitle spells out) provides ‘an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of several young Children’, may seem brutally disciplinary to modern eyes, but in some ways it is empowering literature, allowing boys and girls to read about people their own age, showing children in full control of their lives, and even lecturing their elders. The children may be dying, but, as Gillian Avery points out, ‘they are ‘enjoying the sort of dignity and esteem that few of their contemporaries could have experienced and all must envy.’<sup>5</sup>

Why stop here? There is plenty of evidence that children were reading, and delighting in, all sorts of material long before Janeway and Bunyan, let alone Newbery, were writing for them. Journals, memoirs, spiritual autobiographies and other such sources reveal that, throughout the early modern period, children were reading fables, courtesy books, the *Gesta Romanorum* (a collection of legends, lives of saints and heroes and stories), chapbooks (short, cheap popular stories often sold by peddlers), even chivalric romances and novels. Francis Kirkman (born in 1632) reminisced about his early devotion to chapbooks then romances:

once I happened upon a Six Pence & having lately read that famous Book of the *Fryar and the Boy*, and being hugely pleased with that, as also the excellent History of the *Seven Wise Masters of Room* [i.e. Rome], and heard great Commendation of *Fortunatus*, I laid out all my money for that, and thought I had a great bargain ...; now having read this Book and being desirous of reading more of that nature; one of my School-fellows lent me *Doctor Faustus*, which also pleased me, especially when he travelled in the Air, saw all the world and did what he listed.... The next book I met with was *Fryar Bacon*, whose pleasant Stories much delighted me: But when I came to Knight Errantry, and reading *Montelion Knight of the Oracle*, and *Ornatus* and *Artesia*, and the Famous *Parismus*; I was contented beyond measure.<sup>6</sup>

None of these titles were intended especially for children, but clearly this did not stop children reading and enjoying them. Indeed, the first of Kirkman's books, *The Friar and the Boy*, telling of a boy's use of a magic charm to make his step-mother fart uncontrollably, has been called (surely too emphatically) 'perhaps the first story appealing directly to children'.<sup>7</sup> It was first printed by Wynkyn de Worde in about 1510, but had been circulating in manuscript for much of the fifteenth century. For that matter, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* were probably read and enjoyed by children, the evidence for which is the existence of various abridgments, as well as the apparently juvenile marginalia that sometimes covers the manuscripts. Some medievalists now argue that, as Nicolas Orme puts it, 'Children's literature in England, in terms of both content and readership, began in the middle ages', meaning by 1400 at the latest.<sup>8</sup> Going further back still, others have written about children's reading in classical Rome and Greece, ancient Egypt and, most fascinatingly, in the earliest of all recognised civilisations, ancient Sumer (located in what is now Iraq and Iran).<sup>9</sup>

This gallop back through the early history of children's literature shows two things. First, we find that there is no simple way to define children's literature. When we use the term, do we mean books read only by children? Or only books that children would have enjoyed? Or only those that were deliberately intended for their amusement? Second, whichever definition we use, we find that children's literature has no easily discernable starting point. For as long as books (or manuscripts, or clay tablets) have been read, children have been reading them too, and their reading has throughout all these centuries often been entertaining as well as instructive. Whichever text we identify as the first 'proper' children's book, an earlier example can almost always be found to fit whatever criteria we are using.

Yet surely something did change in mid-eighteenth century in Britain. What Newbery and his competitors and successors did was to establish children's literature as a distinct branch of print culture. They were the first to market a product which was exclusively for children (or at least putatively so, for the producers of these books also had to convince the adults who would actually be buying most of them that this was a new product worth investing in). And they were the first to try ostentatiously to offer both amusement and instruction, whether religious or secular, moral or commercial.

Bunyan and Janeway may have written children's *books*, but, simply because no such thing yet existed, they were not producing children's *literature*. By the same token perhaps the first books produced by Newbery, Boreman, Cooper and others were not children's literature either, but as this kind of commodity gained a foothold in the market, the idea of children's literature was born in the minds of their contemporaries.

Purchasers were certainly plentiful enough to keep Newbery and his rivals publishing this kind of product, all the while steadily refining it. Indeed, by the end of the century publishing houses specialising in children's literature had sprung up, and even some of the most august mainstream publishers had been drawn into the market. There were specialist children's bookshops. Children's books began to be stocked in circulating libraries. Reviews of children's books began to appear in the main literary journals, and in 1802 Sarah Trimmer established the *Guardian of Education* as a periodical dedicated to the subject. By the close of the century it had become possible for a few men and women to carve out careers for themselves as writers for children – Richard Johnson, for instance, who wrote many books for Newbery, or Trimmer, whose death after a long career in children's literature prompted letters to the *Gentleman's Magazine* demanding a 'national monument' in St. Paul's Cathedral. Such was the growing status of children's literature, and its remunerative possibilities, that a number of successful writers for adults were drawn to attempt children's books. When, in 1749, Sarah Fielding turned from novels for adults to write a girls' school story, *The Governess*, her claim that she wrote only 'to cultivate an early Inclination to Benevolence, and a Love of Virtue, in the Minds of young Women' is credible (although she apparently made the very large sum of £256 from the book).<sup>10</sup> But fifty years later, the letters of the celebrated if penurious poet and novelist Charlotte Smith make it clear that she turned to children's literature because it paid well and was (she thought) easier to write. She hoped for £50 per volume, the same as for her novels for adults. Even William Godwin, the philosopher and successful novelist, turned his hand to children's literature, as both author and publisher, 'to establish a more secure income' (as his entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* puts it).

This was still the infancy of children's literature though, not its full maturity. Certainly, even at the end of the eighteenth century, the new kind of children's literature was not reaching all of the nation's youth. For one thing, not all children

were literate, limiting the maximum constituency for children's literature to a few tens of thousand. For another, even the most successful children's books had small print runs, seldom more than 1000. And although many chapbook-style children's books were available for as little as a penny, the more respectable books generally cost between one and two shillings for each volume, effectively pricing readers from outside the middle and upper classes out of the market. What this meant was that many children, even after the arrival of a new children's literature, were still reading the same kinds of texts that their predecessors had made do with, whether bibles and Psalters, primers and textbooks, fables, chapbooks or romances. A second important point is that the growth of children's literature was a symptom of wider social, economic and cultural changes rather than being due to the sudden creation of instantly appealing texts by a circle of brilliant authors and daring publishers. The 'causes' of children's literature are too various, and too little researched, to be dealt with in detail here. Demographic change is clearly one important factor, for a diminishing childhood mortality rate resulted in a larger market for children's books and a greater willingness to invest in children. Economic changes were crucial too, not only because increased affluence and the 'consumer revolution' brought more commodities, of which literature was one, into homes, but because of the greater possibility, in the increasingly capitalistic eighteenth century, of socio-economic advancement. Children's books not only celebrated this possibility, describing how poor children could become rich (Newbery's *Goody Two-Shoes* for instance, who starts off so poor that she has only one shoe, but ends the Lady of the Manor), but were also marketed to parents as the very instruments by which children could acquire a more prosperous future. This promise is neatly encapsulated in the title of a later work, *The Alphabet of Goody Two Shoes; By Learning Which, She Soon Got Rich* (1808).

Just as important in the development of children's literature was a growing emphasis on the importance of education, and particularly maternal education. Mothers' education of their children was represented throughout eighteenth-century culture not only as a personal responsibility but as a national, some critics say imperial, duty. Hannah More for example was in no doubt about how crucial it was: 'The great object to which YOU, who are or may be mothers, are more especially called, is the education of your children', she wrote in 1799; this was no small thing, she insisted, but 'a

power wide in its extent, indefinite in its effects, and inestimable in its importance.'<sup>11</sup> This argument had been made since the reign of Queen Anne at the start of the century, not only in conduct books and educational treatises, but across a full range of media, from poetry to portraiture to children's books. Well before the advent of a commercial children's literature mothers had been devising their own educational techniques. Many accounts describe mothers using pictorial ceramic tiles, for instance, to teach the alphabet or the bible. Others painstakingly manufactured their own educational tools, most famously Jane Johnson who, in the 1740s, wrote out and beautifully decorated thousands of cards, toys and homemade books to teach her children how to read and what to think (miraculously, these artefacts still survive, though many others, no doubt, have been destroyed).<sup>12</sup> The precise link between these home-made texts and the subsequent wave of commercial children's books is obscure, but the continuities are obvious. To put it bluntly, Newbery and his competitors commercialised a process that already existed (although to commercialise was not necessarily always to supersede, for handmade books and teaching aids continued to be made). Many later eighteenth-century children's books were explicitly designed to be used by mothers teaching their children. They often represented exactly this process in both text and image, perhaps especially in the dedications and frontispieces, two parts of the 'peritext' designed to persuade consumers to buy the books and use them in the 'proper' manner (see fig.1).<sup>13</sup>

Accounts of eighteenth-century children's actual reading experiences – diaries, letters, memoirs – confirm that children's books were sometimes used under close supervision, as stringently recommended by most educationalists and in the books themselves. Henry Walton's portrait of *Sir Robert and Lady Buxton and their daughter Anne* (c.1786) shows just such a reading context (fig.2). But other accounts – the more candid of the memoirs and, occasionally, marginalia – reveal children's sometimes solitary, secretive, promiscuous and even subversive reading habits. Often, it seems, the chief pleasure children derived from their books was not from the lessons, nor even from the stories, but from the book as physical object – its illustrations, its feel in their hands, and the satisfaction of the simple fact of ownership. Certainly many books tried desperately to instil in children a textual rather than material appreciation of their books, and warned parents that close supervision was the only way to ensure that children benefitted from their books. But even if



Walton's portrait is not necessarily an accurate depiction of children's reading it remains interesting for what it tells us about the centrality that children and their books had achieved in the middle-class family. The parents' devotion to their child is emphasised, and represented in terms of their interest in her education. Sir Robert has even interrupted his own reading to register what is perhaps a crucial stage in his daughter's development as she reads with her mother. Just as important is that Anne is shown as a consumer, with her own toys (the miniature basket), her own furniture (the low chair), and her own books (one has been casually dropped on the floor, for books were clearly no longer quite so valuable as they once were). It was in this changed economic, pedagogic and emotional context that children's literature was able to become established as a separate part of print culture.

So, what kinds of books were produced for children in the second half of the eighteenth century? Probably the dominant genre was the moral tale, at least in terms of influence if not of numbers (purely instructional and devotional books remained the best-sellers). Among the most celebrated are Sarah Fielding's school story *The Governess* (1749), Anna Laetitia Barbauld's deftly pedagogic four-volume *Lessons for Children* (1778: small books printed with much white space to enhance readability, the content becoming progressively more sophisticated as the putative reader grew), Thomas Day's Rousseauvian *Sandford and Merton* (1783-89) and Sarah Trimmer's animal story *Fabulous Histories* (1786: later known as *The History of the Robins*). Others were set out as a series of linked shorter stories, notably the six-volume *Evenings at Home* by John Aikin (1792-96; with additions by Barbauld), and Maria Edgeworth's tales of Rosamond and Frank, Harry and Lucy, the first of which appeared in 1796 in *The Parent's Assistant* with many others added in an array of different titles over the course of the next quarter century. Many of these moral tales were written by the 'Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames, and Moral Mothers' – astute and quietly pioneering women whom Mitzi Myers collectively named the 'mentorias'.<sup>14</sup> But some hack writers also turned their hand to this newer kind of respectable, not to say earnest, publication – Richard Johnson, for example – and they often succeeded admirably. If Barbauld, Trimmer, Edgeworth and others were writing for more affluent readers – their child protagonists often had servants, spare cash and parents with private incomes – their works were imitated and made cheaper to suit less affluent markets. *The Governess* and *Evenings at Home* cost one shilling and

sixpence per volume. Works by Johnson such as *The History of Tommy Careless or the Misfortunes of a Week* (1787), published by Elizabeth Newbery (wife of John Newbery's nephew), could cost as little as one penny.

There were many varieties of moral tale, increasingly directed at discrete sub-sections of the market (older or younger, girls or boys, more or less affluent), but in general they can be characterised as novels in miniature, succinct narratives set out over fifty or a hundred pages, or sometimes divided into a series of linked shorter stories. They usually took children as their lead characters, and the text always advanced one or more easily comprehensible behavioural lesson. What was left out of them is in a way more important than what was put in. They were not overtly pious and they included little that was fanciful or fantastic and redolent of popular literature. (Some of Newbery's early publications were unusual in this regard: *The Little Pretty Pocket-Book* began with a letter from Jack the Giant-Killer, and *Goody Two-Shoes* teaches a raven to read and write.) Samuel Johnson's somewhat confused reactions to this new kind of product highlights this shift away from popular culture. According to his friend Hester Lynch Piozzi, Johnson's own childhood delight (like Francis Kirkman a century before) had been chapbook tales such as 'St. George and the Dragon' and he claimed that 'it was the only reading which could please an infant'. Indeed, continued Piozzi (who might be expected to know something about children's tastes, being the mother of twelve children), 'he used to condemn me for putting Newbery's books into their hands, as too trifling to engage their attention. "Babies do not want," said he, "to hear about babies; they like to be told of giants and castles, and of somewhat which can stretch and stimulate their little minds."' <sup>15</sup> Yet in a 1750 number of *The Rambler* Johnson was more perceptive: 'The works of fiction, with which the present generation seems more particularly delighted,' he wrote, 'are such as exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind.' If this was happening in literature for adults, in the novels of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett and others, it was the policy of writers for children too. The underlying principle, as spelled out by Johnson, was straightforward: 'when an adventurer is levelled with the rest of the world, and acts in such scenes of the universal drama, as may be the lot of any other man; young spectators fix their eyes

upon him with closer attention, and hope by observing his behaviour and success to regulate their own practices, when they shall be engaged in the like part.’<sup>16</sup>

*The Holiday Spy*, probably by Richard Johnson and published by Elizabeth Newbery in around 1780 (price one penny), perfectly embodies this rationale (fig.3). It begins with Tommy Thoughtful coming home to London from school for the Whitsuntide holidays. He is taken by his father to ‘the great warehouse for little books at the corner of St. Paul's Church-Yard’ – Newbery’s shop – where he is noticed by a kind lady – presumably meant to be Elizabeth Newbery herself. She is so impressed at the very correct selection of books that Tommy makes that she offers him the chance to turn author himself and to write an account of all his friends. Having gained his father's permission, Tommy accepts the offer with alacrity. After all, the Lady has promised him payment of ‘the best cake my pastry-cook can make, and likewise of a complete set of Mr. Newbery's little gilt books.’ What follows, as the book’s full title puts it, are *The Observations of Little Tommy Thoughtful, on the Different Tempers, Genius, and Manners, of the Young Masters and Misses, in the Several Families which he visited, during his last Breaking-up, to be continued occasionally for the Entertainment of his School Fellows*. When he visits Peter Playful's house, for instance, Tommy is impressed by Peter's skill at marbles, whipping tops, making kites and so on, and his all-round jollity. But, says Tommy, because he is encouraged by his lax father Peter ‘spends too much of his time in acquiring these useless perfections, while the ... solid advantages he would derive from his books are little thought of.’ Miss Betsy Goodchild, by contrast, ‘read to admiration, and showed me some of her needle-work, which almost equalled painting.’ Tommy is particularly impressed by the harmony reigning in her home:

I did not observe in this house, what I have too often see in many others, violent disputes between mothers and daughters. I have seen many a pretty little Miss crying for half an hour together, and her Mamma talking to her in high words, threatening to whip her, or put her in the coal-hole, if she was not quiet, and at the last let the little Miss have what she wanted. No, it was very different in this house; for if Miss Betsy had a particular mind to any thing, she would ask for it in the most humble and submissive manner. If her Mamma smiled, it meant *Yes*; if she

frowned or shook her head, it was as good a *No* as if she had said a thousand words: for Miss Betsy never asked for one thing twice, nor ever entered into any altercation, in hopes of getting what she wanted, as she had always been taught to consider, that nothing would be denied her which was proper for her, and she had too much good sense to persist in endeavouring to obtain what might be hurtful to her.<sup>17</sup>

There is perhaps no such thing as the ‘typical’ moral tale, but many of the form’s characteristics are visible here. This is a thoroughly secular text, and deeply quotidian: deliberately, even overstatedly, rooted in what are supposed to be children’s ordinary lives. Equally characteristic is the unvarnished presentation of models for readers either to emulate or execrate, their virtues or failings clearly signalled in their names. It is important to notice, though, that parents are very thoroughly implicated in the behaviour of their children, good or bad. This attempt to lecture both children and adults is another frequent feature of such moral tales. Also familiar is the way in which attitudes to books provide an index of children’s moral worth. So many of these early moral tales are metafictional in this way, books depicting their own use (proper and improper), and publishers using their products to endorse their own products. Embedded in *The Holiday Spy* we can also find what might be regarded as the overriding ethos of the moral tales, namely the control of childhood. This text is very nakedly about the surveillance of children, the book attempting to ensure that readers internalise the monitoring gaze of the Lady in the shop. In the fictional world Tommy is her hired ‘spy’. But in the readers’ real world it is the books that are her agents, coming into children’s homes as the rewards of virtue but also to expose their vices, and even those of their parents. A moral tale like this is about espionage, but it is also itself the instrument of inspection and regulation. And in *The Holiday Spy*, as throughout the genre, what is being controlled is the child’s desire. What most impresses Tommy about Betsy Goodchild is that she conquers her own yearnings, not asking for any thing twice, nor entering into any debate, but wholly submitting to her mother’s judgment. The good children of the moral tales do not simply do what they are told, but, like Winston Smith in George Orwell’s *1984*, learn not to want anything other than their supervisors, or think anything different.

If this sounds oppressive we should remember that books like *The Holiday Spy* were, in another way, liberating. They pointedly provided children with a literature of their own, a literature that was pitched at children and designed to entertain them. The same might be said of the very much more religious works that started to appear as one manifestation of a pervasive Evangelical revival at the very end of the eighteenth century. The Religious Tract Society (RTS) was founded in 1799 with the specific aim of commissioning and distributing cheap, pious publications; within a few years some of these were being written exclusively for children. The tracts may have been strict but they were carefully designed to appeal to children through eye-catching illustrations, engaging narratives and children's sheer pleasure of owning a product designed especially for them. They also effectively spread children's literature to much less affluent sections of society. The RTS's *Interesting History and Pleasing Adventures or Tommy Trip*, published in about 1830, is a good example. It loses no opportunity to explain that 'the Saviour ... came down from Heaven to die for poor sinners, that being cleansed from their sins by His precious blood they may have their hearts changed', or, in more secular but no less stern terms, that 'A kite flies best when you hold it tight, so when children are kept in the right way they will be happiest.' Yet, while kept short and cheap, the tract was made to resemble an enjoyable children's book of the sort Newbery and his successors might have published. Tommy Trip was a familiar name (he had made his first appearance, accompanied by his dog Jouler and Woglog the Giant, in Newbery's 1752 *A Pretty Book of Pictures*) and his story in the RTS appropriation parallels the worldly advancement of a Goody Two-Shoes. She had become the Lady of the Manor; Tommy, through his pious and kind behaviour, rises to become 'head ploughman, and has the highest wages of any body on the farm' (although it is noticeable that Tommy stays firmly within his class while Goody had joined the squirearchy). The RTS tract also offers an attractive woodcut on each page and, alongside the piety, includes several scenes of games-playing and Guy Fawkes Night effigy-making (for Tommy 'recollected the minister said that this day was kept as a holiday to remind us of the designs of the papists against the protestant religion, and that where the papists had power they would not let people have Bibles or Testaments').<sup>18</sup>

Other Evangelical authors, outwith the auspices of the RTS, produced similar works but at greater length and for more affluent readers. The most enduring of these texts

was Mary Martha Sherwood's *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818, with further parts in 1842 and 1847). It is renowned as a severe book, even cruel, reprising the seventeenth-century Puritan conviction that humans are born sinful and need to be strongly disciplined in this world, especially in their youth, if they are to avoid eternal punishment in the next. In accordance with this doctrine, Lucy, Henry and Emily are variously harangued, shamed, ostracised, beaten, starved, incarcerated and, most notoriously, taken to see the rotting corpse while it hangs in a gibbet. Yet nineteenth-century memoirs time and again record a childhood fondness for the book. The children's author Mary Louisa Molesworth (born 1839) insisted that '*The Fairchild Family* was my favourite by far', although she disliked the prayers that closed each chapter. Revealing how children's reading strategies can subvert authorial intentions, she recalled that 'These I was too conscientious to "skip", but they were a sore trial, till at last I hit upon the plan of *reading forward* a certain number of them, so that I could then go back and enjoy the story straight on without the uncongenial break!'<sup>19</sup>

But not all nineteenth-century children were reading such Evangelical works. Many of their accounts resemble Francis Kirkman's and Samuel Johnson's in their description of a fascination with chapbook tales that were not especially intended for children. While we should not discount them entirely, these claims may be a little tendentious. The reasons why William Wordsworth, John Clare and Charles Dickens, all of whom offer this kind of testimony, admired chapbooks was because (they said) they were somehow 'of the people' and fuelled the imagination in a way that modern children's books did not. They were resentful that didactic and religious texts, intended solely for children, had supposedly supplanted folk literature, and were stultifying the rising generations. 'Think what you would have been now,' Charles Lamb wrote to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'if instead of being fed with Tales and old wives' fables in childhood, you had been crammed with geography and natural history?'<sup>20</sup> In reality, the divide between chapbooks and children's literature was much less pronounced than the Romantics' nostalgia made it seem. The increasingly dynamic publishing industry was developing a new product around 1800, a sort of fusion of the traditional chapbook and the moral tale: what might be called the 'children's chapbook'. A typical title, giving an indication of its hybrid nature, is *The House that Jack Built, To which is added Some Account of Jack Jingle, Showing by what Means he acquired his Learning and in consequence thereof got rich, and built himself a House*. These

children's chapbooks were cheap and often printed outside London. They were probably designed to reach consumers who had become aware of the attractions of the new children's literature, but who either could not access or afford more expensive and metropolitan children's books.

The proliferation of these children's chapbooks demonstrates that the rise of the moral tale and religious tract had not quelled the appetite for the fanciful and fantastic. In fact, though some authors might have rejoiced – or complained – that 'dragons and fairies, giants and witches, have vanished from our nurseries before the wand of reason', the supernatural had never really been absent from children's literature.<sup>21</sup> The classic fairy tales of Charles Perrault, Madame d'Aulnoy and others were published throughout the later eighteenth century. Even some of the most respectable children's writers – Fielding, Fenn, Sherwood (not to mention the Newberys) – employed fairy tale characters, motifs and narratives to advance their rational or spiritual agendas, developing a new sub-genre, the 'moral fairy tale'. But in the first decades of the nineteenth century the fantastical became more central to children's literature.

William Roscoe's *The Butterfly's Ball and the Grasshopper's Feast* (1806), charming engraved images and text giving a whimsical account of the social lives of insects, inspired a welter of imitations. Benjamin Tabart began publishing book-length fairy tales and individual stories from the *Arabian Nights* and the chapbook traditions from 1804. And John Harris, who had taken over the Newbery firm in 1801, quickly began to issue delightfully illustrated titles like *The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard* (1805). Even his more didactic titles, published in 'Harris's Cabinet of Amusement and Instruction', showed the influence of this new emphasis on the fanciful: *Peter Piper's Practical Principles of Plain and Perfect Pronunciation* was published in 1813 and *Marmaduke Multiply's Merry Method of Making Minor Mathematicians* in around 1816. By the time the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm were published in Britain in 1823 they were appealing to a taste that was already firmly established.

It might be said, then, that by the accession of Victoria in 1837 children's literature was approaching maturity. Some critics have argued that Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published in 1865, is the first truly modern children's book, for it offered a full-length narrative designed solely for children's pleasure. But

rather than seeing it as something entirely new, it is probably more accurate to regard *Alice* as the zenith of a taste for the whimsical and marvellous that had been established in the early nineteenth century. It certainly has much in common with books that came before: outright whimsy like Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* (1846), and extended fairy tales like John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* (1851), William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring* (1854) and Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863). And it is not so far removed from some of the more light-hearted Evangelical novels, such as Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1839). This was ultimately a religious book, with a pious deathbed scene as a conclusion, but it also celebrated the exploits of its mischievous child protagonists in a manner not wholly dissimilar to modern accounts of acceptable transgression like Dorothy Edwards' *My Naughty Little Sister* or Richmal Crompton's *Just William* stories. Lewis Carroll gave a copy of *Holiday House* to the Liddell sisters shortly before he told them the first version of the Alice story.

This 'genealogical' approach to children's literature – to establish *Alice*'s literary lineage – is not always helpful. It is too teleological, and the artificial narratives that get imposed on the history of children's literature can distort our readings of individual texts. In any case, by the middle of the nineteenth century, children's literature had become too diverse to be easily organised into one, or even several, lines of descent. Children's literature had become so securely established that it ranged across markets and genres. Different books were being published for rich and poor, for girls and boys, for Anglicans and dissenters, for metropolitan, provincial and colonial readers, for infants, children and young adults. As well as fables, fairy stories and moral tales, children were reading adventures novels like Frederick Marryat's *Children of the New Forest* (1847), family stories like Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856), school stories like Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), and this is not to mention poetry, picture books, moveable and doll books, devotional works and all sorts of non-fiction. Dozens of publishers had entered the market, some enduring but most going to the wall after a brief burst of productivity. New technologies (especially for illustration), and more sophisticated promotional and distribution strategies transformed the market. Books became larger, and more colourful. They become more cheaply and widely available – and often, as a result, since they were no longer the treasured luxuries they had once been, more ephemeral.



At the other end of the market, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* sold for the exorbitant price of seven shillings and sixpence. That it was an immediate success (in terms of sales even if not with its first reviewers) is testimony to the maturity of the market. Consumers, it is clear, no longer had to be persuaded that children's books were a worthwhile purchase, as had been the case when Newbery began his operation. Rather, publishers, authors and illustrators were competing against each other for their share of the profits that were evidently to be made. It was this competition that triggered what has been called the 'Golden Age' of children's literature from the 1860s to the 1920s, just as, a century before, it had been the struggle to establish the appeal and utility of children's literature that had led to its first blossoming.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Summerfield, *Fantasy and Reason* (London: Methuen, 1984), p.86.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Alderson, 'New Playthings and Gigantick Histories: The Nonage of English Children's Books', *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 60 (1999), 178-95.

<sup>3</sup> See Penny Brown, *A Critical History of French Children's Literature* (2 vols., London: Routledge, 2008), vol.1, pp.7 and 128.

<sup>4</sup> John Bunyan, *A Book for Boys and Girls, or, Country Rhimes for Children* (London: 'N.P.', 1686), p.[ii].

<sup>5</sup> Gillian Avery, 'The Puritans and their Heirs', in *Children and their Books. A Celebration of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie*, eds. Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp.95-118 (p.112).

<sup>6</sup> [Francis Kirkman], *The Unlucky Citizen. Experimentally Described in the Various Misfortunes of an Unlucky Londoner* (London, 1673), pp.10-12.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (London: BBC Books, 2006), p.58.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p.271.

<sup>9</sup> See Seth Lerer, *Children's Literature. A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp.17-56, and Gillian Adams, 'Ancient and medieval children's texts', in *The Routledge International Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, second edition, ed. Peter Hunt (2 vols., London: Routledge, 2004), vol.1, pp.225-38.

<sup>10</sup> 'To the Honourable Mrs. Poyntz', Sarah Fielding, *The Governess; or, The Little Female Academy*, ed. Candace Ward (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2005), p.45;

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*The Correspondence of Henry and Sarah Fielding*, ed. M. C. Battestin and C. T. Probyn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.xxxviii.

<sup>11</sup> Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (2 vols., London: Cadell and Davies, 1799), vol.1, p.59.

<sup>12</sup> For digital images see *A Guide to the Jane Johnson Manuscript Nursery Library, ca. 1740-1759*, online at <http://www.dlib.indiana.edu/collections/janejohnson> [accessed 29 August 2008].

<sup>13</sup> ‘Peritext’ is a term, originally used by Gérard Genette, describing those elements of the book that mediate the relations between the text and reader but are not part of the actual text. Together with ‘epitext’ (mediating elements ‘outside’ the physical book, such as reviews or advertisements), the peritext constitutes the ‘paratext’.

<sup>14</sup> Mitzi Myers, ‘Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames, and Moral Mothers: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Female Tradition in Georgian Children's Books’, *Children's Literature*, 14 (1986), 31-59.

<sup>15</sup> Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D. during the last twenty years of his life* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), p.16.

<sup>16</sup> *The Rambler*, no.4 (Saturday 31 March 1750), *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. III: *The Rambler*, eds. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), pp.19-25 (pp.19 ad 21).

<sup>17</sup> [Richard Johnson], *The Holiday Spy; Being the Observations of Little Tommy Thoughtful* (London: E. Newbery, c.1780), pp. 7, 12, 25, 26-7.

<sup>18</sup> Anon., *The Interesting History and Pleasing Adventures or Tommy Trip* (London: Religious Tract Society, no date but c.1830?), pp. 4, 10 and 13.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Jane Cooper, *Mrs Molesworth. A Biography* (Crowborough, East Sussex: Pratts Folly Press, 2002), p.48.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Lamb to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 23 October, 1802. *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. by E. V. Lucas (London: J.M. Dent, 1935), p.326.

<sup>21</sup> Lucy Aikin, *Poetry for Children. Consisting of Short Pieces, to be Committed to Memory* (1801; London: R. Phillips, 1803), p.iii.

Politicizing the nursery: British children's literature and the French revolution. MO Grenby. *The Lion and the Unicorn* 27 (1), 1-26, 2003.

30. 2003. Chapbooks, children, and children's literature. MO Grenby. *Library* 8 (3), 277-303, 2007. *Children's literature: Birth, infancy, maturity*. MO Grenby. *Children's Literature: Approaches and Territories*, 2009. 12. 2009. "Real Charity Makes Distinctions": Schooling the Charitable Impulse in Early British Children's Literature. MO Grenby. *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25 (2), 185-202, 2002. In-fancy, which is this book's subject, is not a simple given whose chronological site might be isolated, nor is it like an age or a psychosomatic state which a psychology or a palaeoanthropology could construct as a human fact independent of language. If every thought can be classified according to the way in which it articulates the question of the limits of language, the concept of infancy is then an attempt to think through these limits in a direction other than that of the vulgarly ineffable. The ineffable, the un-said, are in fact categories which belong exclusively to human language. Emphasising how children's literature is embedded in the social life of children and adults, the collection brings together lively and accessible scholarly essays by leading scholars, some reprinted and others newly commissioned. It includes sections on poetry, drama and picture books and is supported by detailed introductory material, suggestions for further reading and a colour plate section reproducing illustrations from key children's texts. [Show Less](#). Includes classic texts alongside newly commissioned material from leading scholars in the field such as Peter Hunt, Matthew Grenb