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Edited by M. O. Grenby and Andrea Immel

Excerpt

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PART I

Contexts and Genres

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I

M. O. GRENBY

The origins of children's literature

Many of the most celebrated children's books have a famous origin story attached to them. Lewis Carroll made up 'the interminable fairy-tale of *Alice's Adventures*' (as he called it in his diary) while he was on a boat-trip with Alice, Lorina and Edith Liddell in 1862; *Peter Pan* grew out of J. M. Barrie's intense friendship with the five Llewelyn Davies boys; Salman Rushdie, following the Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 *fatwa*, wrote *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* for his son, Zafir, for Zafir, like Haroun, had helped his father recover the ability to tell stories.¹ The veracity of these stories, and many others like them, is open to question. But their prevalence and endurance is nevertheless important. We seem to demand such originary myths for our children's classics. What we want, it appears, is the assurance that published children's books have emerged from particular, known circumstances, and, more specifically, from the story told by an individual adult to individual children. C. S. Lewis listed this as one of his 'good ways' of writing for children: 'The printed story grows out of a story told to a particular child with the living voice and perhaps *ex tempore*.' Such a creative method is an antidote to what Lewis thought the very worst way to write for children, striving to 'find out what they want and give them that, however little you like it yourself'.² But if we investigate the historical origins of children's books it is clear that Lewis' 'bad way' is precisely how children's literature *did* begin: adults invented a new commodity, deliberately designed to give a newly identified audience what they thought it wanted, or, rather, needed. There are three different kinds of origin to consider in this chapter then, and, on the surface, they can seem incongruent. First, there is the historical genesis of children's literature as a commercial product. Second, there is the idea that children's literature has naturally developed from a culture of adult-to-child storytelling. And third, the biographical accounts surrounding the conception of individual books. What this chapter will argue is that, far from being contradictory, as C. S. Lewis' strictures suggest, all three kinds of origin are importantly interrelated.

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Historical origins

Most cultural historians agree that children's literature, as we recognise it today, began in the mid eighteenth century and took hold first in Britain. With its mixture of pictures, rhymes, riddles, stories, alphabets and lessons on moral conduct – its commitment, as its full title puts it, to 'Instruction and Amusement' – *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, published by John Newbery in 1744, is often regarded as the most important single point of origin. Newbery's role has been exaggerated, perhaps because of his ostentatious insistence that he was providing education and entertainment fused together – a strategy influentially advocated by John Locke in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). Other London author-publishers pre-dated and competed with him, notably Thomas Boreman, whose *Description of Three Hundred Animals* appeared 'for the Entertainment of Children' in 1730, and Mary and Thomas Cooper, under whose names some children's books (such as *The Child's New Play-Thing*, a school book enlivened with alphabets, riddles, dialogues, stories and songs) appeared from 1742. But only Newbery's enterprise endured, the children's publishing dynasty he founded lasting until the nineteenth century. He was the first successfully to commercialise books for children, and he used a simple but durable formula: the encasement of the instructive material that adults thought their children would need within an entertaining format that children might be supposed to want.

What Newbery and his contemporaries did not do was suddenly invent children's literature *ex nihilo*. Instructional books, both secular and religious, had been marketed directly at children for centuries. Among the first British printed books were William Caxton's *Book of Curtesye* (1477) and his translation of *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* (1484), providing boys and girls respectively with instruction on how to behave in a noble household. Francis Seager's verse *Schoole of Vertue, and Booke of Good Nourture for Chyldren, and Youth to Learn Theyr Dutie* (1557) was one amongst many Renaissance children's courtesy books. By the early eighteenth century a wider audience was being served. George Fisher's *The Instructor; or, the Young Man's Best Companion* (1727) was a frequently reprinted compendium of reading, writing and arithmetic lessons and advice on such things as how to write legal documents, to take accurate measurements, to garden, pickle and dye. Meanwhile, John Foxe had been directly addressing children in his infamous *Book of Martyrs* (1563), and John Bunyan's *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686, later known as *Divine Emblems*), Thomas Gills' *Instructions for Children* (1707) and Isaac Watts' *Divine Songs* (1715), among many other works, had put religious and moral lessons into verse. James Janeway's *A Token for Children being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary*

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Lives, and Joyful Deaths, of several young Children (1672) is just the best-known of the many children's books produced by and for Puritans in the late seventeenth century, designed to warn children against worldly temptations and point out the hard path towards salvation. These instructive texts were not suddenly eclipsed in the 1740s. However severe Janeway's accounts of the deaths of pious children might seem in contrast with the milder children's books that subsequently appeared, they remained in print well into the nineteenth century.

Moreover, texts clearly designed to provide entertainment had also been targeted at children before the 1740s. In 1738, Robert Wharton had published *Historiæ pueriles*, an anthology including enjoyable stories such as 'Piramus and Thisbe' alongside more weighty matter. Less miscellaneous, and more thrilling, was the Abbé Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque fils d'Ulysse* (1699), written as an attempt to instruct readers in politics and morality through an exciting narrative, and so much in demand that it was translated into English within a year of its French publication. And, of course, children read texts that were not necessarily designed exclusively for them. There is evidence from diaries, memoirs and marginalia of their enjoyment of chivalric romances, novels, fairy tales, fables, the *Gesta romanorum* (a medieval collection of legends and biographies), chapbooks and popular ballads. One ballad, *The Friar and the Boy*, first printed in about 1510 though circulating in manuscript beforehand, has sometimes been called (somewhat dubiously) perhaps the first story appealing directly to children, because of its account of a boy's use of a magic amulet to make his cruel step-mother fart uncontrollably. But if this is children's literature, then so too must be many other works published for a mixed audience even earlier. Medievalists have recently argued that children's literature began, in terms of both content and readership, in the Middle Ages. Various manuscript abridgments of *The Canterbury Tales* survive, for instance, that were especially designed for, and used by, children. Other critics have gone further back still, arguing that material was being produced for children to read in early China, classical Rome and Greece, ancient Egypt, and even ancient Sumer in the third millennium BCE.

That all these rival points of origin can compete with one another is because important questions of definition remain unresolved. If we ask what was the first children's book, we are really asking what children's literature is. Do we mean texts designed especially for children, or read only by them, not those intended for adults, or a mixed-age audience, that were also used by children? Should we include only those books that 'give children spontaneous pleasure', as F. J. Harvey Darton maintained?³ Or should we insist that a true children's book must appeal to today's children, or at least be 'written expressly for

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children who are recognizably children, with a childhood recognizable today', as Peter Hunt has insisted?⁴ The problem with all these attempts at definition is that we can seldom know precisely who used which books, or how they responded to them. We might think of the Puritan texts of the late seventeenth century as so brutally pious that no child could have taken pleasure from them, but what evidence we have argues that they were seen as empowering and enjoyable, relished by children and adults equally. As late as 1821, for instance, one adult reader called Janeway's *Token for Children* 'the most entertaining book that can be', adding that she and her son read it nightly: 'we be never tired of it'.⁵

An alternative strategy might be to define children's literature on the basis of certain qualities of the texts themselves. Perhaps 'proper' children's books are only those which include rounded child characters, not mythical heroes or fairy tale figures, nor the improbable ciphers, like 'Polly Friendly' or 'Francis Fearful', who appear in much eighteenth-century children's literature. Perhaps true children's books are only those which take seriously the child's point of view, and represent it sympathetically. Or, perhaps, we can identify true children's literature because, as Barbara Wall maintains, writers 'speak differently in fiction when they are aware that they are addressing children'. It is, Wall argues, a particular kind of direct 'narrator–narratee relationship' that 'is the distinctive marker of a children's book'.⁶ But such generic generalisations invite dissension, for children's literature has become so diverse that it is easy to think of examples that stretch any of these definitions beyond breaking point.

Less tendentious is a means of definition that takes us back to the mid eighteenth century. Beyond questions of readership and response, and of generic textual characteristics, children's literature is a commodity, a product that first became securely commercially and culturally established in the age of Newbery. For the first time, publishers like him began to devote substantial resources to a product that was marketed at children and their guardians. They developed separate publishing lists of children's books. Soon, others, such as John Marshall and William Darton, were able to set up new businesses largely devoted to children's books, while even mainstream publishers found that they could not ignore the profits to be made from this new market. The children's books that they produced were different in appearance, and in cost, from works published for adults. Separate advertisements were placed in newspapers. Reviews began to appear in periodicals. By the end of the eighteenth century, an author could start to think of himself, or more typically herself, as a writer for children only.

The rapidity of this 'invention' of children's literature is remarkable. In 1750 the idea of a separate children's literature was still very novel, but as

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quickly as 1780 authors were worrying that it might 'seem superfluous to add to the number of Books which have already been written expressly for the use of Children', and by the end of the century commentators could complain that 'real knowledge and real piety ... have suffered ... from the profusion of little, amusing, sentimental books with which the youthful library overflows'.⁷ These anxieties prompted Sarah Trimmer to establish the first children's book review journal, *The Guardian of Education* (1802–6), and she found no shortage of books to subject to her careful scrutiny. The question is: how had this proliferation happened? There is no simple answer. What is clear is that a series of factors combined to enable the growth of children's literature as a distinct cultural and commercial entity. Equally obvious is that this process did not happen abruptly, but occurred stutteringly across the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

One self-evidently important component of the matrix of factors that generated children's literature was the new status accorded to the child in the early modern period. Philippe Ariès' view (expressed in his 1960 book *Centuries of Childhood*) that modern childhood – recognised as a distinct phase of life, with its own special needs – did not exist until the seventeenth century has been widely contested. But his general observation that children gradually became the object of greater parental and societal solicitude and psychological interest remains convincing. Certainly there were more children around. The English population rose by about 20 per cent between 1720 and 1770. What these demographic and cultural shifts meant was a society increasingly full of, and concerned with, children, and willing to invest in them both emotionally and financially.

Education was closely bound up with this shift. For Ariès, it was a new conviction that children needed religious education that led to the recognition that boys and girls required a period of special treatment before entering the adult world: the period that we now call 'childhood'. Alternatively, we might see the eighteenth century's increased emphasis on education as an effect, not cause, of the new concern for childhood. Certainly, the philosophy of education became a more prestigious subject, with Locke its most celebrated theorist. His call for simple games and books that would engage children, and tempt them to read, has often been cited as an important stimulus for children's literature. But, in fact, Locke's ideas were part of a movement already underway rather than an abrupt innovation. In 1692, a year before the publication of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Sir Roger L'Estrange was already advising that 'Lessons Themselves may be Gilt and Sweeten'd' by incorporating them into pleasant 'Little Stories'.⁸ The title of J. G.'s *A Play-Book for Children to Allure Them to Read Assoon [sic] As They Can Speak Plain*, published two years later in 1694, displays the same

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conviction that entertainment catalyses instruction. Its subtitle – ‘Composed of Small Pages On Purpose Not to Tire Children, and Printed with a Fair and Pleasant Letter’ – exhibits an awareness that children ought to be provided with distinctive books of their own.

A long succession of pedagogical thinkers and practitioners followed Locke into print, of whom Jean-Jacques Rousseau was probably the most influential. Rousseau may have warned, in *Émile* (1762), against forcing boys to read too early, but the attempt to systematise education that he and many others were embarked on inevitably resulted in the publication of more, and more carefully crafted, children's books. Children in the 1780s should have been congratulating themselves ‘on the circumstance of being born in those auspicious times, when children are ... the peculiar objects whose felicity philosophers are studying to promote’, wrote the Frenchman Arnaud Berquin in *L'Ami des enfans* (1782–3), a work quickly translated into English, so insistent was the requirement for new children's books.⁹ New educational methods were recommended, and many new schools were established. Even if, in many boys' schools, an antiquated classical curriculum remained in place, in many other educational contexts – the girls' school, home education – new books, designed especially for children, were urgently demanded and increasingly supplied.

Equally significant in the establishment of children's literature as a separate entity were developments within the book trade itself. The government ended pre-publication censorship in 1695. An Act of 1710 did much to safeguard literary property, and a 1774 court case ended perpetual copyright in England. All this created a more vibrant publishing industry, with greater commercial security and increased access to established revenue streams, and a wider distribution of risk between printers, publishers and retailers – a climate that encouraged entrepreneurialism and innovation. Technological innovations helped. New printing methods, especially for illustrations, were developed, and new binding techniques pushed down prices and facilitated easier transportation of books.

The professionalisation of literature was also important. A move away from a patronage system to the open market helped authors of low-status, potentially mass-market products such as children's books. Even more crucial was the change in the status of the novel. At the start of the eighteenth century, the novel had been widely seen as a moral form suitable for the whole family. Increasingly though, novelists were declining to act as the guardians of the moral welfare of the nation and its youth, and the didactic element was replaced by greater emphasis on form, style and narrative, amatory and erotic elements, or psychological complexity. These shifts encouraged a new literature for children. In effect, children's literature filled the void which the

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novel's rise to maturity, and move away from moral didacticism, had left behind.

Perhaps most important of all in the genesis of children's literature is the socio-economic context. Ian Watt's thesis, in his 1957 *The Rise of the Novel*, that the growth of a middle class led to the rise of the novel might have been widely questioned, but the increasing affluence of certain sections of society was certainly a determinant of the expansion of the market for print. The consumption of non-essential commodities increased hugely in the eighteenth century, and children's books were at the centre of this 'consumer revolution'. With handsome type, attractive illustrations, decorative binding and sometimes even gilt-edged pages, many early children's books were evidently designed to appeal to children's wish to possess them. The establishment of a more strongly defined and self-identifying middle class may also have benefited the children's book market by creating demand for a specifically bourgeois children's literature, contaminated with neither plebeian associations (like chapbooks) nor aristocratic tastes (as transmitted in romances or even fairy tales). But just as crucial as any rise in class consciousness or spending power was the growth of the perception that social elevation was actually possible, even purchasable. Education, and educational books for children, were naturally regarded as one possible motor of social mobility – a point succinctly encapsulated in this 1808 title: *The Alphabet of Goody Two-Shoes, by Learning of Which She Soon Got Rich*. To educate a child became an investment, the potential returns of social prestige and prosperity easily outweighing the initial outlay. And social advancement is one of the principal themes of eighteenth-century children's books. John Newbery's original *History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765), for example, dramatises not fairy tale hopes of sudden, random, social elevation, but the possibility of advancement through education and hard work. The characteristics that lead to advancement are not the traditional moral virtues of Cinderella, but the much more commercial qualities of the successful businessman or wise housewife: diligence, thrift, caution, honesty.

Domestic origins

One further cultural shift, important in catalysing the beginnings of children's literature and doing much to shape the way it developed, requires more detailed attention. This is the new understanding of parenthood that emerged in Britain from the early eighteenth century. In particular the proprieties of motherhood were the subject of enormous interest and endorsement, this discourse coming almost to dominate conduct books and medical treatises, as

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well as portraits and *belles lettres*. 'The Assembly of the Birds', a fable inserted into Sarah Fielding's children's book *The Governess; or, the Little Female Academy* (1749), neatly sums up the principal characteristics of the new, idealised motherhood. In a competition to find the happiest of all birds, it is the dove who wins, even though – in fact precisely because – she does not attend the contest, preferring to remain at her nest, nurturing her brood and awaiting the return of her mate. Such devotion to the home, and especially to children, was increasingly enjoined on men as well, but it was the duties of maternity that were most emphatically stressed. Maternal breast-feeding (as opposed to the use of wet nurses) and the personal supervision of all aspects of infancy were presented as physically and psychologically beneficial to children, but also socially proper, morally virtuous and even patriotic, the surest defence against foreign foes and the best foundation of empire. All this is neatly summed up in the Reverend John Bennett's *Strictures on Female Education* (1787):

When does she [woman] appear to so much advantage, as when, surrounded, in her nursery, by a train of prattlers, she is holding forth the moral page for the instruction of one, and pouring out the milk of health to invigorate the frame and constitution of another? When is her snowy bosom half so serene, or when thrills it with such an innocent and pleasing rapture, as in these silent moments of domestick attention, or these attitudes of undissembled love?

Worth noting here is the role prescribed for the mother in educating her children. Bennett professes himself shocked that a mother could resign the education of her children to a school or a governess. 'No,' Bennett insisted, 'reason, religion, the thrillings of affection, the voice of nature, and the voice of God, the interests of society, the happiness of private life, the honour, the dignity and *true policy* of woman – all say, that a *mother* should be the *preceptress* of her children'.¹⁰

The great benefit of maternal education, it was held, was that mothers would be willing to personalise curricula according to the individual needs of their children. Locke's educational philosophy imagined all children to be the same, their blank-slate minds developing only according to how they were taught. But, as Mary Wollstonecraft put it, 'Every child requires a different mode of treatment.'¹¹ In practice, this meant that mothers were being encouraged not only to design their own lesson plans but also to devise new pedagogical strategies and produce their own educational aids. Instead of 'frequently repeating tiresome Lectures', wrote another commentator, the 'tender Mother successively contrives a thousand new and pleasing Methods to influence her Children'. She will deploy 'little Surprises; Novelties artfully managed; Walks chosen on purpose to introduce new Questions; agreeable Recitals; a Variety

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of historical Cuts; every thing, in short, is employed to raise the Curiosity, and fill up the Vacuities of that Intelligence which only waits for Ideas'.¹²

Eighteenth-century fiction presents many of these innovating mothers: the eponymous heroine of Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740–1) is perhaps the classic example, a paragon who, after her marriage to the rakish Mr B, invents educational stories to tell the children. But there is evidence that real-life mothers conformed to this ideal too. Aristocratic and even royal mothers often boasted in their letters of active engagement in their children's education. But the most astonishing evidence of such innovating practices is the collection of educational tools and texts produced during the 1740s by Jane Johnson, wife of an independently wealthy vicar. Johnson manufactured over 400 cards, booklets and sets of tiles, all designed to help her teach her children before the boys were sent away to school aged eight or ten. Perhaps the most remarkable single object is 'A very pretty Story to tell Children when they are about five or six years of age' (1744), a sort of moralised fairy story. In the tradition of home-made stories, Johnson personalised the narrative, naming the two central characters after her two oldest children. What is striking about all Johnson's artefacts is the care with which they were made, and her evidently very substantial investment of time and money. The images are skilfully drawn and coloured; the texts expertly composed or painstakingly transcribed; the cards and booklets are carefully cut and trimmed, and sometimes augmented with commercially available prints or paper. These were exceptionally fine examples, but it seems not unlikely that many of Johnson's contemporaries produced similar materials for their children, even if, regrettably, they have not survived.

Jane Johnson was producing these materials between 1742 and 1747, just after Richardson had described the ideal of maternal education in *Pamela* and at the same time as Thomas Boreman, Mary Cooper and John Newbery were making their experiments with publishing children's books in London. The agreement of dates makes it difficult to resist speculating, as Victor Watson has done, that the commercial ventures should be understood not as 'the "beginning" of children's literature', but as the emergence into the public realm 'of a traditional private and domestic nursery-culture – undervalued, orally transmitted from one generation to the next, responsive to changes in contemporary thinking, making a pragmatic use of available materials, and mostly sustained by mothers'.¹³ This is almost to accuse Newbery and others of expropriating somebody else's property, profiting from something that had been available for free, and masculinising something that had previously been produced and controlled by women. But the commodification of home-made products was common in eighteenth-century