

Brief Historical Background to Children's Literature



It is in childhood that we first encounter literature through narratives such as lullabies, fairy tales, alphabets, comic strips, beginning readers, school stories, novels of fantasy, science fiction, and adventure.

Like most literature, children's literature stems from the oral traditions of myth, fable, legend, folktale, and religion. The written tradition in English began in the **medieval period**, when children's literature was aimed at privileged young males and consisted mainly of books with which to teach manners, morals, and Latin.

The introduction of the printing press in the **fifteenth century** increased the availability of books as well as literacy rates. The *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658) by Johann Amos Comenius, a Latin grammar (originally written in Latin and German) that used pictures to provide young pupils with 'sensual' images of the world is generally considered the first children's book. By the seventeenth century, English had replaced Latin as the language of instruction, and the audience for most books for children included boys and girls, though girls were not still given the same educational opportunities. John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744) is acknowledged as the first children's book in which amusement, rather than religious indoctrination was important.



In the **eighteenth century**, the French philosopher Rousseau introduced radical ideas about childhood education that had a great impact in Europe. Rousseau claimed that children should be brought up apart from, and thus uncorrupted by, society. Rousseau advised children to read Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), an English classic written for an adult audience.

In the **late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries**, new schools to cater for the children of the growing middle class were created and literacy rates increased. The Romantic movement (Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth), whose landmarks are the

imagination, individuality and originality created the nineteenth century's golden age of children's literature. The Romantics considered children as innocent, and childhood as a sacred time of life. These ideals are central to Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books (1865, 1871) in which Carroll mocks some of the conventions of classic literature for children, including nursery rhymes.

In the **late nineteenth and early twentieth century** schooling started to be compulsory, which led to a high increase of literacy among the working class. Advances in printing technologies allowed books to be colourfully illustrated. Several best-selling authors appeared at this time: Robert Louis Stevenson (*Treasure Island*, 1881), Rudyard Kipling, Beatrix Potter, Louisa May Alcott (*Little Women*, 1868), L.M. Montgomery (*Anne of Green Gables*, 1908) and A.A. Milne. Many of these best-sellers appealed to a dual audience of children and adults.

In the **twentieth century**, we witness a dramatic increase in the interaction of children's literature with mainstream culture. Books become the source of new ideas. Animated television programmes for children (*Sesame Street*) frequently stem from or are influenced by children's literature; Disney films are based on fairy tales, traditional stories and novels.

Besides, social changes beginning in the **mid-twentieth century on** have brought changes in the contents and issues of Anglo-American children's literature which, like literature for adults, has transcended its white Christian origins and now reflects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of its audience. In the United States, writers like Alma Flor Ada (Cuban-American), Lucille Clifton (African-American), or Pat Mora (Mexican-American) include the rich traditions and experiences of non-white children.

Children's literature includes a wide variety of **genres** ranging from alphabets, picture books, conduct books for boys and for girls, primers, fairy tales, fables, adventure stories, to school stories, comics, verse (lullabies, baby songs, nursery rhymes, riddles and word play), or plays.

Sources:

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