

School stories

This type of stories or genre is characterized by a number of conventions. However, these have changed in the course of time, keeping up with changes in society, schools, education or notions of childhood and children

In traditional school stories –dating back to the 18th century- the school and its members function as substitutes for the family. Independence from parental control and the importance of self-reliance and loyalty to peers are emphasized.

The school story essentially emerged from the exclusive world of the English Public School (Eton, Winchester), with its gender and class divisions. Public schools (‘internados privados’) are anything but public: they cater for a rich, semi-aristocratic, upper-middle-class elite and have very clear characteristics. The schools themselves are always in large old mansions in the country. The boys’ families generally live in London, and when school starts in September they travel to the school by train. Strict rules are applied with regard to uniforms, and competitive sports play an important part in school life. Each school is divided into four “Houses” which compete in sports and also in cultural activities like theatrical productions and debates. The teachers are called “masters” and until recently always wore gowns and mortar-boards. There is often an Army Cadet Corps in the school, which encourages military training and provides basic material for Officers’ Training Colleges. Some conventions of character are: the manly boy, misfit child, sporty girl, scholarship pupil, tomboy, bully. Stock scenes include the big game, the midnight feast, the inspiring teacher’s speech, the new boy beating the school bully, the dramatic rescue, the showdown in the principal’s office. This fiction includes very little about intellectual education and very much about physical, moral and character education. The message conveyed is always that of manliness: men are honest, brave, strong, disciplined, adventurous, truthful and loyal. Weakness, moral or physical, is the worst sin.



There has always been a clear link between the Public Schools and the prestigious universities of Oxford and Cambridge, though this has diminished considerably in recent decades. Identification with the school is total, and even in later life “the old school tie” serves to help recognise people in professional walks of life and establish contacts. All the high-level administrators of the British Empire came from Public Schools, and even today large sectors of the economy (the banks, the petroleum companies), the military, foreign diplomacy are still dominated by “old boys” from public schools. Though school stories are usually set in a world of privilege, their readership tended to be young people whose school lives were very different from that presented in the books.

School stories for girls emerged later, in the late nineteenth century, because female education (and boarding schools for girls) was a later phenomenon. They were modelled on school stories for boys. However, the education portrayed was different, because the theories of education applied to girls were different.

Rousseau's is an infamous example: "the whole education of women ought to relate to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honoured by them, to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, to make their lives agreeable and sweet – these are the duties of women at all times and they ought to be taught from childhood". In spite of this, traditional school stories for girls usually feature "New Girls", athletic, lively, intelligent, independent and loyal.

School stories written from the second half of the twentieth century on are more relevant to the experiences of their children's audiences. The *Harry Potter* series is a blend of genres which includes the Public School Story.

You are going to read a typical Public School story, Blair Fleming's "The Stamp that Vanished", and a less conventional School Story, Eleanor Estes's "The Hundred Dresses" (1943). "The Hundred Dresses" has an American setting, and its protagonist is Wanda Petronski, a Polish immigrant girl who is mistreated by her class mates Peggy and Maddie.

Bibliography and works consulted:

Heilman, Elizabeth. *Critical perspectives on Harry Potter*. Routledge, 2003 (see especially chapter 9 "Generic Fusion and the Mosaic of *Harry Potter*")

Zipes, Jack. *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature: The Traditions in English*.

_____. *Sticks and Stones : the Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. Routledge, 2002.

White, Lana. *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. University of Missouri Press, 2004. (one of the chapters explores the school story as one of the literary ancestors of the series).

Photograph: "Frosted spider webs on boarding school fence". (c) myke, 2005. In flickr with cc licence.