The History of Children's Books, No.5: The 'Second Golden Age'

Article Author: John Rowe Townsend [1]

The 'Second Golden Age?

In the decades which followed World War II the development of quality books for children was supported by library buying and encouraged by high standards in the United States. John Rowe Townsend explains.

More and more, in the half-century since the end of World War II, children’s literature has reflected trends in the wider world. If there is a phrase which sums up its overall development, it is ‘from the garden to the street’. In the earlier part of the period, the ambiance of children’s books was still, in the main, a comfortable and protected one. Within its limits it harboured a flowering of creativity which has been called, with some justification, the second golden age (the first being the half-century or so leading up to World War I). In the latter part of the period, the economic climate grew harsher, protective fences broke down, new issues demanded attention and new challenges had to be faced.

The war years themselves, not surprisingly, were rather barren. Authors and publishers tended to be otherwise engaged; paper and other resources were scarce. In 1943 and 1945 the premier British children’s book award, the Carnegie medal, was withheld for lack of suitable candidates. After the war, only a few of the pre-war veterans remained active. Among them were Edward Ardizzone, who was still Britain’s outstanding illustrator and picture-book creator, Geoffrey Trease and Noel Streatfeild, who were to go on writing fiction for many years to come.

New Beginnings

In the late 1940s and the 1950s there was a new beginning. The inspiration for this was in part institutional, and came from the United States. For many years, American publishers had appointed distinguished and powerful children’s editors, who had worked with librarians and educationists to raise the quality and status of children’s books and to take them out to the children.

Strong links between New York and London publishers helped to extend this development to Britain. Oxford University Press, the most prestigious imprint, scrapped its previous run-of-the-mill children’s list and appointed a succession of able editors in Frank Eyre, John Bell and Mabel George. Americans such as Grace Hogarth at Constable and Marni Hodgkin at Macmillan were soon to become prominent in British children’s publishing. Allen Lane established Puffins as a highly selective paperback list; production of ‘quality’ books for children became a viable and important part of the trade. Such books were often described as ‘librarians’ books’; a phrase which may be seen with hindsight to hint at problems which were to arise in less halcyon days.
Leading Names

The leading writers of the new wave were Rosemary Sutcliff, William Mayne and Philippa Pearce. Rosemary Sutcliff’s work as a historical novelist had at its heart a sequence on the making of Britain which began with *The Eagle of the Ninth* in 1954. Sutcliff’s view of history was of her generation and may now seem dated, but she had total imaginative grasp of her material and was a fine storyteller, with the gift of making the past come vividly to life. Her heroes tended to be of ?young officer? status; later writers were to replace them with more ordinary and less stiff-upper-lipped protagonists, and military history gave ground to social history.

William Mayne?s formidable output has extended to more than a hundred books. His early work included a series of spectacular treasure-hunts, in which strange treasures were sought and found in complicated ways; he had been writing for more than a decade before venturing into fantasy with the remarkable *Earthfasts* (1966). Since then he has written fiction of all kinds for all age-groups; he has been greatly admired by adult commentators but never particularly popular with children. How much of his work will survive is hard to predict. Philippa Pearce?s writing, in short stories as much as in novels, has a quiet, unpretentious distinction; her masterpiece, *Tom?s Midnight Garden* (1958), still seems to me to be the outstanding British children?s book of the half-century.

The 1950s saw the appearance of several works of fantasy that have survived through later years: L M Boston?s half-dozen books, set in an ancient house based on the one where she herself lived and died and beginning with *The Children of Green Knowe*; C S Lewis?s Narnia series, appearing between 1950 and 1956, and Mary Norton?s *Borrowers* and its successors, about the small people who live in the nooks and crannies of old houses. Roald Dahl?s *James and the Giant Peach* appeared in 1961, to be followed by the famous *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) and many other titles. Dahl is as much attacked and defended as Blyton, and equally popular. I personally do not care for his work, which I think often has an unpleasant flavour, but there is no denying his talent.

Also in the 1960s came the well known and greatly admired fantasies of Alan Garner, including *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Owl Service*; and the first few novels of Leon Garfield, whose exuberant action most often took place in a colourful eighteenth century invented by himself. John Christopher raised the standard of science fiction with his Tripods trilogy, beginning with *The White Mountains* in 1967, and Peter Dickinson?s trilogy of the Changes, in which a future England turns against technology and returns to a dark age of brutal ignorance, began with *The Weathermonger* in 1968.

Comedy

Good comedy is scarce in children?s books, though facetiousness is plentiful enough. Joan Aiken?s cheerfully unhistorical, funny and endlessly inventive sequence of novels set in the reign of that hitherto unknown monarch James III began with *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* in 1962 and *Black Hearts in Battersea* in 1964. Helen Cresswell first showed her comic gift in such titles as *The Piemakers* (1967) and *The Signposters* (1968), and went on to produce series-books about Lizzie Dripping, the Bagthorpes and other characters. Most successful of all series-books were those about *Thomas the Tank Engine* and his friends, by the Rev. W Awdry, which began in 1945 and chugged their way steadily through the period.

War Themes

World War II itself was not for some time a fruitful source of literature for children; the best books about the war appeared years afterwards when events could be seen in perspective and recollected in tranquillity. Some of the best were about the evacuation of children from cities to safer countryside. Nina Bawden?s *Carrie?s War* (1973) and Michelle Magorian?s *Goodnight, Mister Tom* (1981) were notable examples: the one coolly perceptive, the other warmly sentimental. Jill Paton Walsh?s *Fireweed* (1969) had an uprooted boy and girl surviving precariously through the London blitz of 1940, and *The Dolphin Crossing*, by the same author (1967), got two boys into the action, taking a motor-boat across the Channel to join in the rescue of British troops from Dunkirk. Robert Westall?s *The Machine-Gunners* (1975) had a gang of boys, and one girl, attempting their own contribution to the war effort by smuggling a
Poetry and Picture Books

Poetry for children flourished, and not only in anthologies. In 1950 James Reeves published The Wandering Moon and in 1952 The Blackbird in the Lilac: two books of poems that were wry, poignant, evocative, and sometimes humorous. Ted Hughes, now Poet Laureate, produced his first two collections for children: the zany Meet My Folks! in 1961 and the strange, haunting The Earth-Owl and Other Moon-People in 1963. Charles Causley, a master of narrative verse, began the long line of his work for children with Figure of 8 (1969) and Figgie Hobbin (1970).

The resurgence of the picture-book was even more striking. Brian Wildsmith's ABC in 1962 brought a blaze of colour into children's books which was amazing in its day. Charles Keeping also made powerful use of colour in his first successful picture-book, Charley, Charlotte and the Golden Canary (1967), a modern fairy-tale based on the unlikely theme of urban redevelopment; but Keeping was even more powerful as a draughtsman. His most notable work as illustrator was in his drawings for The God Beneath the Sea (1970), a retelling of Greek myths by Leon Garfield and Edward Blishen. Quentin Blake, John Burningham, Raymond Briggs and Shirley Hughes were other illustrators and picture-book creators who won prominence in the 1960s and have retained it ever since.

This was a galaxy of talent; and good new writers and artists were emerging year by year. The garden was well-stocked and productive. But its limitations were becoming apparent. A gap was opening up between the so-called ?book people? (publishers, reviewers, booksellers, public librarians) who drew delighted attention to the quality of the books available, and the ?child people? (teachers, school librarians, parents) who pointed out that the majority of children did not actually read these splendid books. The golden age, it was argued, was golden only for some.

Underlying this situation were profound and disturbing issues which would come increasingly to the fore. The market moreover was changing; the assumption that almost any well-produced book bearing the imprint of a respectable publisher was assured of steady library sales could no longer be relied on. As the 1960s ended and the 1970s began, the outside world was breaking in.

John Rowe Townsend has been writing, and writing about, books for children and young people for many years. Three of his books ? Gumble's Yard, The Intruder and Noah's Castle ? have been serialised on television. His history of English-language children's literature, Written for Children, published by The Bodley Head at £9.99, is in its sixth and, he says, final edition.

In the next and final article in this series, John Rowe Townsend brings the story of children's literature up to the present day.