



The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature

Article Author:

[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

[163](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Brian Alderson assesses this new work of reference.

No two encyclopedias of children's literature will be the same but their evaluation demands assessment of their scope not to speak of their authority and accuracy. Format, clarity and accessibility are the other factors that crucially underpin the endeavours of the compiler/s of encyclopedias. How successful is the new **Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature** ? **Brian Alderson** discusses.

<!--break-->

Towards the end of his revelatory five-page Introduction, Jack Zipes the Editor-in-Chief of this extensive work pays tribute to some predecessors. Having noted the 'excellence' of Klaus Doderer's **Lexicon** (which he doesn't date properly) he goes on to commend as 'fine books' the Carpenters' **Oxford Companion**, Watson's **Cambridge Guide**, Silvey's **Children's Books and their Creators** and Culinan & Person's **Continuum Encyclopedia**. Very well; but what one would like to know is whether he has actually read these hefty volumes and whether he found anything in them to assist his own editorial labours. For 'leaving aside the Silvey, which had none of the vaulting ambitions of the other works' one needs some convincing that they are 'fine books' (the Continuum volume is laughably inadequate) or that Professor Zipes's perusal of them has helped him in any way to devise a better class of reference book than the ham-fisted job that we have here.

For what is revelatory about his Introduction is not so much his questionable assessments of his forerunners as the casualness with which he describes his own task. His two-page summary of the 'historical background' is a travesty (he even gets the date of **Robinson Crusoe** wrong) and his two-page statement of 'editorial principles and practices' slides erratically across some of the book's surface features. He rightly recognizes the complexity of the subject and impresses us with the fire power he has brought to bear on it: over 3200 entries, with 400 illustrations, and a brigade of over 800 contributors whose offerings have passed the inspection of some 32 editors and 30-odd members of the production team. He regrets that it was not possible to dwell more fully on international publishing 'although the variably-divided articles on non-English-speaking countries are one of the **Encyclopedia**'s few successes' but he tells us nothing of his strategy for dealing with the home-grown products that are the main substance of the four volumes.

One assumes that the designers of the editorial scheme for the **Encyclopedia** would have given thought to the likely expectations of its users and arrived at some sort of 'hierarchy of necessity'. Thus, with the bulk of the contents being devoted to individual performers (authors, illustrators, publishers, commentators etc) decisions would surely be needed about giving uniform treatment to such matters as biographical data and their relevance to creative work, the chronology and range of that work and how the publishing data should be recorded, the reception and/or significance of the work in its own time and today (query: allowing room for the contributor's subjective opinions?), the provision of references to bibliographical and critical sources, which will encompass primary sources not mentioned in the main article and secondary sources which will enlarge upon the discursive element of the entry, and, finally, cross-references to related topics within the encyclopedia. That point takes on a particular importance where the composition of general articles is concerned. Entries devoted to individual persons, titles, or subjects will have supplementary coverage elsewhere and

careful editorial control is needed to ensure that repetitions are eliminated, contradictions avoided, and agreement achieved in any citations or critical remarks that are duplicated.

The Editor-in-Chief has nothing to say about how these crucial structural determinants were arrived at and it may well be that, despite the demands of his 'complex' subject, they were never codified at all. There are inexplicable inclusions and omissions; the weight given to the treatment of varying subjects is not always well-judged; there is no consistency in the recording of biographical or bibliographical data (in the latter case of both primary and secondary sources); and although there is an extensive and helpful index the cross-referencing within the body of the book is dire. Literal and substantive errors also abound. [NB. Indicative examples of the failings of the work under all these heads, for which space cannot be found here, will be posted on the **BfK** website to coincide with publication of this article.]

I have no doubt that the levelling of these blanket criticisms will be regarded (not least by the Editor-in-Chief himself) as yet another example of this reviewer's penchant for nit-picking (although when you come across such sizeable nits as the allegation that the Kelmscott Press published children's books illustrated by Beardsley, Crane and Kate Greenaway you must wonder what all the sixty-two editors were up to). But objectors should perhaps bear in mind that this work is not only expensive but is being produced by one of the world's leading academic publishers. The editorial team have a responsibility not only to their customers who are forking out good money for the thing but also to those who expect university presses to sustain our much-threatened standards of scholarship. This confused and ill-edited encyclopedia is an affront to both.

[ps. your reviewer must 'declare an interest'. He has actually contributed one article to the present work (on Book Design), composed late in the day at the request of one of the senior editors.]

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature edited by Jack Zipes [and many friends], illustrated, is published by Oxford University Press (4 vols. xxxvi, 436; 469; 465; 505pp, 978 0 19 514656 1, £275 hbk).

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant of **The Times**

 [Oxford Encyclo Childrens Literature.JPG](#) [3]

Page Number:

6

Source URL (retrieved on Aug '19): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/163/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/the-oxford-encyclopedia-of-children%E2%80%99s-literature>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/brian-alderson>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/163>

[3] [http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Oxford Encyclo Childrens Literature.JPG](http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Oxford%20Encyclo%20Childrens%20Literature.JPG)