The author and editor Leila Berg, who has died aged 94, was a passionate advocate for the empowerment of children, particularly through literature. In an article in the Manchester Guardian in 1967, she discussed the importance of children having access to books: "The child from the bookless home comes stone cold to reading; and what do we give him in the classroom? We give him readers where father mows the lawn (what lawn is part of his life, for heaven's sake)? where the whole family sits down to have breakfast at a snowy damask-clothed table, all properly dressed and calm, and full of polite, grammatically correct, griefless, angerless, joyless, lifeless conversation."

Leila's indignation at the exclusion of any representation of working-class or ethnic minority lives from children's books prompted her to devise and launch in 1968 the Nippers series of early readers books published by Macmillan, many of which she wrote herself. Family life incorporating such mundane yet never before represented activities as eating fish and chips and doing the pools or details such as an unemployed father was incorporated into chatty, playful narratives with repetitive cadences and unexpected, humorous twists? no mean achievement when control over vocabulary and sentence difficulty must also be exercised. The books' colloquial style was matched with lively, expressive illustrations, often by Richard Rose. Leila's innovative approach led her to invite like-minded progressive writers to contribute to the series. The political dramatist Trevor Griffiths (Tip's Lot), the Guardian Fiction Prize winner J L Carr (Red Windcheater) and the first Black headteacher in London, Beryl Gilroy (Rice and Peas), all wrote for Nippers.

The initial response to the Nippers books was outrage, but following the publication of the 1965 Milner Holland Report on London housing, the critics had to concede that the housing conditions they depicted (tin baths, outside lavatories etc) still existed. Amidst the furore, the quality of Leila's stories tended to be overlooked, although not by everyone? to
Leila’s surprise, Brian Alderson, the stringent children’s book critic of The Times (and now Books for Keeps columnist) praised her ?neatly turned text? and ?narrative momentum?. Some Nippers were later criticised by social critics who found their depictions patronising or stereotypical but the pioneering innovation of the series as a whole is undeniable and many titles have stood the test of time.

Leila had wanted to be a writer from the age of six, when her first poem was published in a comic. Born Leila Goller into a Jewish family in Salford, Greater Manchester, Leila wrote vividly and poetically about her bleak childhood in her autobiography, Flickerbook (published by Granta in 1997), which took the form of a series of images and vignettes, as she ?re-experienced? rather than remembered events. She had a painful ?non-relationship? with her doctor father, who refused to speak to her because she was not a boy and only began to communicate with her when he and her mother split up, just as she was leaving school. At the age of 17, Leila encountered the work of the educational psychologist and psychoanalyst Susan Isaacs on the social development of children at the Malting House School in Cambridge, a nursery school where children were given free rein to read, learn and explore. While Isaacs? ideas were influential in helping to form the young Leila?s anti-authoritarian and progressive views on children, education and society, her father?s rejection must also have been profoundly formative.

In 1937, Leila reluctantly agreed to go to teacher-training college ?for one term only? but spent her time writing and organising aid to Spain during its civil war. She had earlier joined the Youth Front against War and Fascism and then the Young Communist League. Two of her lovers were in the International Brigades and were killed. She left college before she could be expelled and went to King?s College, University of London to take a diploma in journalism. Her career started with the Daily Worker (later the Morning Star).

During the Second World War, Leila, now married to Harry Berg and heavily pregnant, narrowly escaped death with her husband when their house at the foot of Parliament Hill in London was bombed, an experience she described in an article for the Guardian as like becoming a ?refugee? in her own country. After the war, she began to write children?s books for various publishers. Her writing was based on her own experiences ? her Salford Jewish childhood (A Box for Benny, 1961), her own children, the nursery she ran in her home. It was also much shaped by her desire to show children as they really are ? active, argumentative, thinking (Little Peter Stories, 1952 and the Streep Street series illustrated by Lisa Kopper, 1987). She was Children?s Books Editor at Methuen from 1958-1960 and then editor of Salamander Books at Nelson, 1965.

Leila?s interest in progressive education brought her into contact with, among others, Michael Duane, the head of Risinghill comprehensive school in Islington, north London. Following the closure of Risinghill, a demonstrably successful school, she argued in her book Risinghill: Death of a Comprehensive (1969) that its very fame and success were threatening to the educational establishment. She wrote: ?Once you believe, or say you believe, that all children are of equal value whatever their intellectual attainments, you are changing the whole concept of school.? Leila?s interest in progressive education continued with her writing the text for John Walmsley?s photographic book, Neil and Summerhill (1969). This was followed by Look at Kids (1972) and Reading and Loving (1977).

In the 1970s I became involved in children?s rights and it was thus inevitable that I should soon encounter Leila. She was generous with her knowledge and her time. After a meeting at my house about a project called Children Photographed (also involving the feminist/socialist photographer Jo Spence), for which Leila had agreed to select the photographs, she gave my daughter a signed copy of one of her children?s books, Fire Engine by Mistake (1955). It was typical of Leila?s practical radicalism that this book had been published by Brockhampton Press because they had started a series of cheaply produced children?s hardbacks that families on low incomes could afford to buy.

Leila received the Eleanor Farjeon award for services to children?s literature in 1974. Her later years where spent in
Wivenhoe. She was delighted to discover that the Children's Legal Centre (in whose creation she had been instrumental in its early days) was then housed at nearby Essex University.