



Children's Books & Politics

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[Robert Leeson](#) [1]

[25](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

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Robert Leeson puts the topic in perspective.

"Neither traditionally, nor rationally is there a case for saying that politics are alien to children's literature."

Robert Leeson considers the idea of

Children's Books & Politics

'Children's books seem to be very political these days', I overheard someone remark at a conference. I think I know what they were talking about. In the past year we have had novels giving the once over to the police, the army, dictatorship, indoctrination, disarmament, nationalism, direct action and hijacking.

What did this person mean, though? I could only guess. The tone did not suggest approval, but rather what would Mole and Pooh think about all this?

Part of the problem is what do we mean by children's books? The field is vast. It includes reading matter for a tremendous age range, from those just walking and talking to those breaking the barriers of the age of consent, the driving licence, the dole giro and the vote. And it is not always easy to determine where one sort of young person gives way to another, not in a world of instant communication to the heart of the family home.

The BBC lays down that John Craven's Newsround should not show for example, police struggling with pickets or football fans. But if the set is left on for 20 minutes longer, the early evening news will reveal all.

This is not to say the BBC is an ass, but to say that the notion of children' and 'children's books' as a single uniformly protected area, like a nature reserve, is not a viable proposition. Nor is it a desirable one, in my opinion. The readership of these books is not an adult audience, it is not any audience. This is not a free for all - I write what I please and scream censorship if you object. But neither is it a 'no go' area.

The notion of children's books as a 'no go' area, is not as traditional as some might think. Nor is the notion of children's books as a suitable place for the dramatisation of fundamental ideas of justice, liberty, wealth, poverty, something thought up by late 20th century trendies.

Two hundred years ago, 150 years ago, it was not unusual for writers of children's books to deal with such matters as slavery, land enclosure, the follies of the rich and idle, and the wickedness of war. One magazine complained that the villains were too often grasping landlords or cruel workhouse overseers. But these matters since they were part of life, were a legitimate source of drama for stories.

During Victorian times, with the development of a 'nursery' literature, some subjects became taboo, but the best authors considered the larger world to be their parish. In the so-called First Golden Age of late 19th century, writers like George MacDonald and Edith Nesbit had no hesitation in discussing what some might think to be very political matters. Some

Nesbit admirers might be surprised to hear, in **The Amulet**, the assertion that the vote is given to the poor to keep them quiet (and this from the mouth of a child, too).

Only in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, did the idea of a completely protected literature, with the centre of gravity for suitability round about the 8-10 age range, become dominant. When Enid Blyton died, the **Daily Mail**, looking back on the near 50 years of her writing career praised her because whatever went on in the world, her books remained the same.

Yet it is also recognised that this period was a low point in the history of the literature. It recovered its standards and its vigour after the Second World War.

This was when we began to see historical novels about real history and people, not as someone once remarked, about 'armies composed entirely of officers'; school stories about real schools, and family novels about real homes, of every kind, not just the Christopher Robin plus Nannie sort. While on this topic, one must recall that the bizarre restriction of the school story to the subject of private boarding schools, conveyed a message (that other schools and children don't count) which is intensely 'political'.

Ah, some will say, you are discussing realist books. And of course, there must be such, but the true heart of children's literature is the fantasy, wizards, giants, enchantments and all that, not social issues.

Beware fantasy! Fantasy is the most philosophical, the most ideological, the most political of forms of writing. It is in fantasy, in the creation of other worlds in the author's imagination that ideas about the real world, consciously or unconsciously, have the freest play. And it is from fantasy that the young reader may most readily, in the long term, absorb ideas about how the world ought to be. This is true of Thackeray, Nesbit, MacDonald. It is also (Sorry Mole) true about Kenneth Grahame. If you think **Wind in the Willows** is an innocent tale of animals, read Peter Green's biography and get a sense of the inner social fears of class struggle and disorder, of an author who was also Secretary of the Bank of England. It is true of C. S. Lewis, J. P. Martin, Richard Adams, and any number of others.

A fantasy which makes an impact must be full of ideas. Arch fantasist Lewis Carroll deliberately makes his heroine question and overturn all she had been told. If there is a subversive book (or books, rather) it is the Alice saga.

Lewis Carroll a secret Red? Well, it is true that he did believe, in advance of most dons, that women should have the right to go to university. But no. It is a common error among those who favour the status quo, that politics equals subversion, or that anything that disturbs them is 'politics' while what they believe is simply natural.

Once, during a radio interview, I praised Winifred Cawley's **Gran at Coalgate**, the story of a girl staying with her grandmother during the General Strike.

'Oh', interrupted the interviewer, 'I don't think children want to read about politics'.

When people say 'children don't want to read . . .' they mean 'I don't think they ought to read...'

In fact, though, Winifred Cawley was writing a personal story, and using the General Strike as a natural backdrop to it. Now the General Strike is of great importance in the history of many working class people. On the millions who lived in mining areas during the 1920s and 1930s, it had a far greater impact than say, for example, the Coronation. Yet had I cited a book about a girl coming to London during the Coronation, I doubt if any interviewing eyebrows would have been raised. The Crown, the monarch are above politics, the miners, the unions are not.

Yet is the Queen above politics? Earlier this year she suggested that there was an unacceptable gap between rich and poor nations. That was a basically human conclusion that anyone working in the field of children's literature would regard as unexceptional. In fact she was attacked by Enoch Powell and the Editor of **The Times** for an ill-advised intrusion into politics.

Humanity, the raw material of children's books, can thus become politics. In these times, to remain human, to share the right to be human with every creature in the world, may well be 'political'. And if we do not involve the younger

generation in consideration of ideas about the way the world goes, while they are growing up, what sort of adults will they make?

Neither traditionally, nor rationally is there a case for saying that politics are alien to children's literature. What counts is what is the writer conveying, realistically, fantastically, consciously or unconsciously. If one were to take the writers whose work I have mentioned, specifically or in passing, and apply the Gallup Poll to them, some would fall to the left some to the right and some among the don't knows. But what they believe in, their world view, is expressed in their writing.

What then should the reader, the intermediary, parent, teacher, librarian, expect of them?

I think, first, that they aim for the truth. Any writer who says 'I show the world as it is', is, of course, guilty of enormous conceit. The 'world as it is' is far too complex for any of us to capture. But we must and do seek honestly to show what makes people tick, what makes them laugh or cry, love or hate, suffer or die. Growing up is a matter of striving and learning. Adults who look back carefully at their own lives will recall how much they learned, how much they were encouraged, at second hand, by a writer whom they never met, but who once, in a flash, made something real and clear for them, for the first time. Or, along with other writers, helped his readers to make up their own minds about things, a vital part of the process of growing up. (Like the 'take nothing for granted' message of 'Alice' for instance).

Thus a writer may take any issue and say something of value to a young audience. If the writer, however, bends events, characters, suppresses crucial information about them, to achieve a particular end, then both aesthetic and moral alarm bells start to ring.

Whether taken from the large world of 'politics' or the small world of family or friends, the issues in any story eventually boil down to the most fundamental moral questions, not so much Left or Right, as right or wrong. It is the moral heart of the book which determines whether we value it, not the way we think the author votes.

On a personal note, when children read my books, I am being taken into the home, along with the parent. I have ideas, an outlook, a sense of justice, a wish that human beings should work together for the good of all, and a knowledge that they don't always; an experience of life, the funny and the not so funny side. It's something I share with many parents and teachers. As a writer I offer it to their children without taking liberties. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the writer must be judged not on the theme, but on what the writer says.

As a citizen the writer may be active in politics, which are a compromise between certain groups of human beings, banded together as they see it to set matters right. Politics in that sense do not make books. But the root and raw material of politics and literature are the same. The writers' words, like the political actions of their fellow citizens must ultimately be judged by the same human, moral standards.

A concern at the way the world goes is a sure sign that the heart of children's literature is alive and beating strongly.

Robert Leeson has written nineteen books for young people from 8-18 years of age. Among these are historical novels like **Bess** (Fontana Lions, 0 00 672218 0, £1.25) with its strong female central character, short compelling reads like **The Demon Bike Rider** (Fontana Lions, 0 00 671320 3, £1.00), realistic teenage fiction - **It's My Life** (Fontana Lions, 0 00 671783 7, £1.25), and of course the **Grange Hill** stories. His latest book is **Genie on the Loose** (Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 11177 3, £5.75 and Fontana Lions, 0 00 672294 6, £1.25), a sequel to the much enjoyed **The Third Class Genie**.

He is also a critic and lecturer on children's literature and for many years was Children's Editor of the **Morning Star**. Due to be published this autumn (by Collins) is his latest book of criticism provisionally entitled **After the Golden Age** - thoughts on fiction for the young, past, present and future.

Page Number:

4

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