

Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction  
Kimberley Reynolds

Questions for thought and discussion

Introduction: What is children's literature?

- Have there been any recent examples of books published for children that reflect particularly well key debates in contemporary culture?
- Can you name any children's books that you think offer a radical critique of Western culture?

Chapter 1: An outline history of publishing for children in English

- How would you go about deciding whether a book is addressed to young readers?
- Are you aware of any books published for adults since the twentieth century that have been adopted by children in the way texts such as *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe* were in the past? If not, how do you explain this? Are there 'adult' books that you think could be read and enjoyed by children? If so, why do you think they are not marketed to children?
- Watch [President Obama reading Maurice Sendak's \*Where the Wild Things Are\*](#) to a group of children at the White House. How is this similar to or different from earlier presidents' use of children's books?
- Are children's books still didactic?

Chapter 2: Why and how are children's books studied?

- How do you explain the return to prominence of gender-specific books for children?
- How far do you agree with Perry Nodelman that children's literature provides a space in which adults colonize childhood?
- Are wordless picturebooks still literary texts?

Chapter 3: Transforming the texts of childhood

- Do new digital media require new ways of writing and reading?
- Why do you think fantasy stories such as *Harry Potter*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Tolkien's stories about Middle-earth have so often been interpreted in a variety of media?
- Is fan fiction written by children children's literature?

Chapter 4: Genres and generations – the case of the family story

- How do you think concerns about the environment and biodiversity are being reflected in the way stories about animals are being written for children?

- What kinds of new adventure stories for children are being written today and what do these tell us about cultural anxieties and aspirations?
- Look through the picture books on offer in a large bookshop or from a major online bookseller. How many kinds of families do you see reflected there? What does this reveal about what children understand as 'normal' for families today? How far does this affect the underlying relationships and power structures associated with the traditional nuclear family?

#### Chapter 5: Visions of the future

- Look at the extract from Henrich Hoffman's *Struwwelpeter* on pages 100 – 101. What makes Hoffman's treatment of the death of a child comic rather than tragic? Does it have any religious resonance? What does this suggest about changing attitudes to the relationship between childhood, education, religion and children's literature?
- What kind of writing do you think is most likely to encourage children to prepare for building a new kind of future?

#### Chapter 6: Ethical debates in children's literature

- Can you locate any contemporary children's books that could be regarded as propaganda? If so, how overt are they in the way they present their views? How easy would it be for readers to resist the messages the writers and/or illustrators are attempting to convey? What is the difference between propagandising and writing didactically?
- Are there topics that you still consider unsuitable for children's literature?

#### Other books by the author

Reynolds, Kimberley, *Children's Literature Between the Covers* (Frederick, MD: Recorded Books, 2011) Audiobook

Reynolds, Kimberley & Grenby, Matthew co-eds. *Children's Literature Studies: A Research Handbook*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Reynolds, Kimberley, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

Reynolds, Kimberley, *Modern Children's Literature: An Introduction*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)