

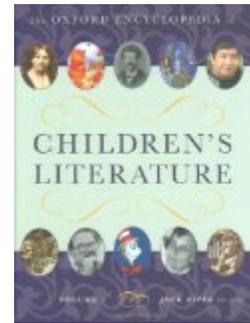
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jack Zipes, ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 1,824 pp. \$495.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-514656-1.

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Children's Literature Writ Large and Multitudinous

The very idea of an encyclopedia seems absurd. How can all that we know on a subject be condensed into a set of books? What is "all"? Who are "we"? What is "to know"? Its impossibility matches a persistent desire to know and to order, to create, in Thoreau's words, "an abstract of human knowledge." [1] A product of Western European enlightenment, the model we know of today is based on a premise that the world could be known through human reason and that knowledge could be presented in a coherent way using the order of the Roman alphabet.

Every encyclopedia is also a product of its time. This postmodern world of the twenty-first century questions at its core the authority of the guardians of Knowledge: academics, librarians, lexicographers. Like the eighteenth-century encyclopedia of Diderot, which championed skepticism and rationality for radical ends, the contemporary encyclopedia is called to reflect and construct a conflicted discourse of discovery.

With this daunting challenge, how does the impressive four-volume *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* measure up? This monumental effort, led by Professor Jack Zipes and a team of scholars, thrusts the study of children's literature on to a global stage for the first time. The field, which has been academically active for little more than a quarter-century, has traditionally centered on Anglo-American literature for children in English. Various guides to the literature abound, its closest relative being *The Cambridge Guide to Children's*

Books in English (2001), whose title delimits its range: the format of books and the language of English. This earlier standard functions more like a dictionary and is aimed to be "a critical and appreciative overview," without bibliographical resources. Intending to be browsable, *The Cambridge Guide* used tiny print and few illustrations, which made it more likely to be used for discreet reference than for desirable reading. Therefore, despite a bounty of books referencing biographical figures, genres, and canonical texts, the field of children's literature was shy of a subject-specialized work worthy of its global reach and rich classical heritage and cultural life.

The field is no longer bereft. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* is a landmark of accessible scholarship for an interdisciplinary audience and a common reader. I am pleased to be one of its more than eight hundred contributors, having written a mere two of its 3,200 entries. Contributors were asked to write in an approachable style, geared for high school students on up, and to include select bibliographical references. Notably, contributors were also asked to move beyond description toward a more critical tone with a contemporary lens. The coverage of traditional topics and canonical texts would be enlivened with new scholarship challenging normative views. Bibliographies of select significant scholarly works would extend the reader's quest further.

The editor-in-chief, Jack Zipes, is a scholar of extraordinary breadth and conviction. Director of the Center for German and European Studies at the University of Min-

nesota, Zipes has published well over fifty books—with more in the wings—on a range of subjects related to folklore, storytelling, and German literature. Notably, he is the editor of the new *Norton Anthology of Children's Literature: The Traditions in English* (2005), another landmark in the field of academic Children's Literature: an elegant textbook with the cachet of Norton. Zipes has perhaps done more than anyone else to establish Children's Literature within the academy, to critique its canon and literary history, and to expand its categories to include works of popular culture and film. In both massive projects—the *Encyclopedia* and the *Anthology*—he drew on a cadre of fine scholars in the field, which he humbly acknowledges at every opportunity. He even excluded his name from coverage in the *Encyclopedia*, which includes many contemporary biographies of creative figures in the field.

The range of coverage in the *Encyclopedia* is far-flung. Here is Children's Literature writ large: an attempt to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible in providing information on all aspects of Children's Literature on all continents with a breadth of context and particularity. The context of children's literature is included, with attention to the work of librarians and editors. The international thrust is evident throughout the volumes; my own horizons were immensely stretched. Its strength is in European coverage, although many other regions receive heightened attention. Literature is defined ambiguously as specifying a multitude of formats, including Internet books, films, digital libraries, crossover books, and much else. The intent is not to answer all questions about international children's literature but to awaken new questions and offer new vistas. The book is meant to be readable, pleasurable. It is indeed aesthetically engaging with well-designed pages and attractive illustrations. Like A. J. Jacobs in *The Know-It-All*, whose mission is reading all of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, I can imagine myself on a similar quest. It is that lively to the mind, that appealing to the senses.

The cast of characters who put together this magnum opus is staggering. Over a five-year period, two editorial boards worked collaboratively with eight associate editors and twenty-two advisory editors. Of the over eight hundred contributors, some are the leading scholars in the field who synthesize a large body of their life's work in a small space: Jack Zipes on Fairy Tales; Gillian Avery on the United States; Peter Hunt on the United Kingdom; John Stevens and Rod McGillis on Critical Theory; Michael Patrick Hearn on *The Wizard of Oz*; Mark West on Censorship; Lissa Paul on Books of Instruction; Brian Alderson on Book Design. The starlit list could go on and

on. Bound by tight word counts, each contributor needed to be spare, to make each word matter. The result is often exquisite in its bare-boned simplicity.

Like all good reference books, the *Encyclopedia* offers more than expected. The cross references move the reader intertextually. The index, two hundred pages long, passes my small sampling. A selected bibliography, a list of awards, a list of twenty-six special collections, and a topical outline of entries extend the research value for the reader.

Some quibbles relate to subjects of close interest. I wish for a more problematic approach to the subject of awards rather than its appreciative, descriptive coverage. Some errors in such a large project are inevitable; I caught the missing fact of Pam Conrad's death in 1996 in her biographical sketch. While many leading scholars are covered biographically, one giant is missing: U. C. Knoepfelmacher, who mentored many a scholar and raised new awareness in Victorian Children's Literature. Anglo-American Storytelling receives a brief entry, yet the larger world of Story deserves more emphasis. The influential Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) deserves its own entry. Some apt cross-references could have been made, such as linking "Kindergarten" to Froebel, "Geography and Travel Books" to *Robinson Crusoe*, "Centers for the Study of Children's Literature" to "Libraries," and so on.

The greatest linkage made is between Children's Literature and its fervent relation to the world. No longer will the field need to defend its presence or seek to define its parameters. As Whitman writes in *Leaves of Grass*, "I am large, I contain multitudes." [2] At last the worrisome question of what is children's literature—and why does it matter—is resolved. No more defensive posture, no high-minded rhetoric need demonstrate why academics take the subject seriously. In these four volumes and over three thousand entries, the editors have positioned Children's Literature within the prison walls of Gramsci, the parlors of P. G. Wodehouse, the theater of Brecht, the village of Achebe. The children's book has leaped from pastoral landscapes into contested terrain, a thorny paradise.

Notes

[1]. Henry David Thoreau, "Visitors," in *Walden; and, Civil Disobedience* (1854; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1983), p. 194.

[2.] Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass* ed. Malcolm Cowley (1900; reprint, New York: Viking, 1959), chant 51, p. 85.

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