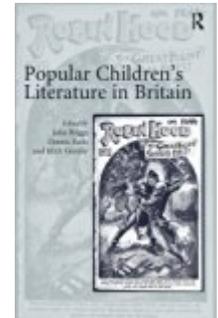


Julia Briggs, Dennis Butts, M. O. Grenby, eds.. *Popular Children's Literature in Britain*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. xiv + 342 pp. \$99.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84014-242-6.



Reviewed by Katherine Ashley

Published on H-Education (September, 2010)

Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik (University of Alberta)

Popular Children's Literature in Britain was a labor of love: begun ten years before its eventual publication in 2008; hindered by a changing roster of contributors; and finished after the unexpected death of Julia Briggs, who initiated the project, the book is a wide-ranging analysis of popularity as it relates to children's literature. As such, the terms of reference are broad, and the book has an impressive set of aims, which are outlined in M. O. Grenby's comprehensive introduction. The contributors think of popular literature in two different ways: it is, on the one hand, aligned with "the quotidian and the 'low,'" intended to appeal to the widest number of potential readers; and on the other hand, it is also literature that has been "commercially successful" (p. 2). The contributors combine textual analysis and empirical research, drawing on sales and circulation figures, reader surveys, and publishers' archives, and consistently reveal how definitions of popular children's literature are complicated by the fact that children themselves may have little say over what they read: their choices are often

made for them, by parents, teachers, librarians, publishers, and prize-giving bodies. It is, therefore, difficult to know what actually appeals to child readers--as opposed to those who buy their books--and since children are not the primary purchasers of their own reading material, sales may not be an accurate indicator of the popular appeal of a book. This point is repeatedly made in the individual chapters, which contain case studies of both well- and lesser-known authors and texts, ranging from the seventeenth century to the present day.

One of the principal merits of the collection is that it is devoted to literature in its broadest textual sense and includes chapters on chapbooks, prose fiction, science texts, and other types of nonfiction, including journalism; it also contains analyses of the connection between literature and popular performance arts, in such chapters as George Speaight and Brian Alderson's, "From Chapbooks to Pantomime." The collection is divided into four parts, all with their own introductions, and while each part interrogates the notion

of popularity in different ways and within different contexts, parts 2 (“Forgotten Favourites”) and 3 (“Popular Instruction, Popularity Imposed”) are of particular interest to historians of education, for they contain both analyses of fictional representations of schools as well as discussions of the popularity of certain books expressly designed to instruct. While there is little sustained analysis of what are now considered classics of pre-twentieth-century popular children’s literature, the decision to concentrate on lesser-known works ultimately adds more to literary-historical scholarly work in the area—unfortunately, it also makes the decision to close the collection with two chapters on the Harry Potter series seem somewhat anomalous.

Part 1, “Old Tales Retold,” focuses on the way in which adaptation has contributed to the popularity of certain genres and stories. Grenby’s contribution, “Before Children’s Literature: Children, Chapbooks and Popular Culture in Early Modern Britain,” is somewhat marred by the use of over-complicated Venn diagrams, but it nonetheless demonstrates how chapbooks aimed at children, integrating traditional popular tales, emerged in the nineteenth century. He shows that there was considerable cross-fertilization between popular culture and children’s literature and also discusses the perceived usefulness of chapbooks for young readers. Kevin Carpenter’s study of the changing nature of Robin Hood stories and David Blamires’s chapter on Madame d’Aulnoy are both telling in terms of how popular stories and fairy tales evolved with the changing publishing industry (which, in turn, reflected changes in literacy and education levels). Blamires’s chapter is a particularly interesting study in literary reception, as it illustrates how translated French *contes de fées* “designed for a refined adult readership” became a part of a quintessentially British popular children’s literature—Madame d’Aulnoy became Mother Bunch and, when transplanted into an English-language context, her fairy tales were progres-

sively “tailored to the needs of children and the less well educated” (pp. 70, 79).

Part 2, “Forgotten Favourites,” contains four chapters devoted primarily to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction. Each chapter demonstrates how a now-forgotten author negotiated popular culture, as well as how their popularity was shaped by close relationships with astute publishers keen on developing the educational market. Editor Dennis Butts demonstrates how the resilient Barbara Hofland, who at one point ran her own boarding school, continually reinvented herself in order to appeal to children, producing a series of didactic stories, teenage advice-style novels, and textbooks structured around dialogues, such as *The Panorama of Europe: or, A New Game of Geography* (1813). Her “dialogue instruction-amusement books” filled a gap in the market (p. 113). The need for instructional, yet entertaining, texts geared toward children increased following the Education Acts of 1870 and 1872 and contributed to the success of authors like G. A. Henty, who wrote over one hundred books, mostly historical adventures. Indeed, in his second contribution to the volume, Butts shows how Henty worked closely with the enterprising educational publishers Blackie and Son, who produced Henty-centered school readers and reward-prize books.

Blackie and Son sold an estimated 3.5 million copies of Henty’s books and reached similar levels of commercial success with Angela Brazil’s school stories. As Henty perfected the historical adventure formula and benefited from the educational reforms of the 1870s, so Brazil’s popularity can, to some extent, be attributed to changes in literacy rates among girls following the educational reforms of the early 1900s. Brazil, who “came to be regarded as something of an expert on ‘the modern schoolgirl,’” virtually single-handedly popularized the girls’ school story genre (p. 177). Judy Simons’s lucid account of Brazil’s popular appeal stresses how “debates about female education,

about careers, about militarism, about class, nation and power and ... adolescence” permeate her fiction, which not only depicts feisty teenage girls living in all-female communities but also engages with issues like curricular change (p. 166).

Similarly, Hesba Stretton’s popularity is due at least in part to her relationship with the Religious Tract Society (RTS), which reproduced her stories. Using information drawn from the RTS archives, Elaine Lomax demonstrates how Stretton’s texts, which integrated popular elements but contained strong didactic and moral overtones, were marketed according to social and educational levels. Different editions were specifically targeted at different readers, with social class being a determining factor. Some texts were deemed appropriate for boys, others for educated girls, and still others for servants, but, as Lomax notes, “even where books were ostensibly aimed at a young audience, publishers were also targeting parents and adults of the lower classes, whose inferior understanding (as it was thought) and need for instruction were in some respects equated with those of children” (p. 128). Stretton’s books were given as reward prizes, and the RTS played an instrumental role in the development of the reward prize industry, in general. This industry grew steadily from the beginning of the nineteenth century as institutions, charitable organizations, and churches sought to publish and award books that were educational, promoted their specific aims, and were attractive to own (thereby reflecting well on the organization). Whether they appealed to their intended readers was another matter. As Kimberley Reynolds points out in her excellent chapter, which outlines the types of books likely to be given as reward prizes, the themes they dealt with, and their reception, “many of the reward books found in collections today have survived precisely because they were *not* popular” with children (p. 192).

Reynolds’s chapter is one of three, in part 3, which deals with the notion of imposed populari-

ty—that is, books that were “designed with a purpose—to instruct, improve, edify and reward” (p. 185). Like Reynolds’s contribution, Aileen Fyfe’s “Tracts, Classics and Brands: Science for Children in the Nineteenth Century” is a comprehensive and well-argued analysis. Indeed, the fine line that the RTS walked in publishing scientific texts with evangelical aims makes for interesting reading given current debates surrounding the presence of religion in science classrooms. Fyfe makes her case by focusing more on publishers than readers, and once again this reviewer finds that books and tracts targeted at middle-class children were also expected to appeal to working-class adults “because of their low cost and simple language, at a time when there was only a limited range of popular science books for adults” (p. 215). Fyfe analyzes the birth of dialogue- (or “conversation”)-based science books for children in the eighteenth century, as well as the subsequent turn to third-person narration by the mid-nineteenth century. She discusses the subjects most often dealt with in these books, and, using John Aikin and Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s *Evenings at Home* (1792-96) as an example, illustrates how publishers like Routledge re-branded outdated scientific texts as “classics” in order to capitalize on their popularity long after their initial appearance. Other classics of children’s nonfiction include Arthur Mee’s *Children’s Encyclopedia* (1908-10) and the *Children’s Newspaper* (1919-65), both discussed in Gillian Avery’s chapter, “Popular Education and Big Money: Mee, Hammerton and Northcliffe.” Although this chapter is arguably too biographical in approach, it effectively shows how profitable popular educational publishing ventures could be.

Part 4 contains four essays that bring the collection up to date, grouped under the title, “The Famous Three: Blyton, Dahl and Rowling.” Some mention is made of Roald Dahl’s work in the field of education, and David Rudd’s chapter, “From Froebel Teacher to English Disney: the Phenomenal Success of Enid Blyton,” deals with education

in passing. Together, these four chapters bring to light the way in which children's literature has come into its own as a genre. The "famous three" freed children from the choices of their guardians: Blyton, Dahl and Rowling sold--and continue to sell--well, but are also enjoyed by children, since they "appealed directly to child readers, often over the heads of parents, teachers and librarians" (p. 247).

On the whole, *Popular Children's Literature in Britain* is a valuable work of literary history that successfully charts the gradual emergence of a children's literature that reacts to and participates in wider cultural debates, even if the volume in its entirety inevitably reaches no conclusions as to what popularity itself might consist of. The individual essays in the collection demonstrate how children's literature was and is still affected by class, gender, and socioeconomic issues. The popularity of certain texts is determined, at least in part, by the choices parents, publishers, prize-givers, and (increasingly) marketing managers make.

,

,

but

-

like

-

,

,

-

as well as

100

1

3

s

17

-

19

4

-

--

,

--

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-education>

Citation: Katherine Ashley. Review of Briggs, Julia; Butts, Dennis; Grenby, M. O.; eds. *Popular Children's Literature in Britain*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. September, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30140>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.