

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

APPROACHES AND
TERRITORIES



Edited by Janet Maybin
and Nicola J. Watson



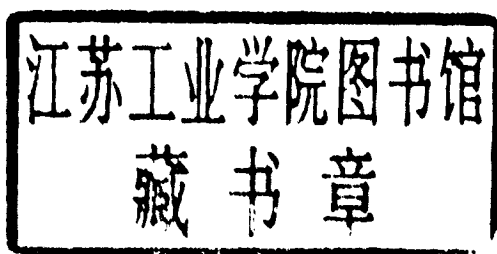
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Children's Literature: Approaches and Territories

Edited by

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Introduction

Janet Maybin and Nicola J. Watson

Children's literature is, as Peter Hunt has argued, a 'remarkable area of writing: it is one of the roots of western culture, it is enjoyed passionately by adults as well as children, and it has exercised huge talents over hundreds of years' (1994: 1). The enjoyment brought by children's literature is generally taken for granted – as it relates to child-readers. Less evident, less confessed, but deeply seated, is the continuing foundational investment of adult readers in their childhood reading. As a field of academic study rather than a source of private pleasures, children's literature has not always been accorded the status that Hunt gives it. The academic study of children's literature has only become firmly established relatively recently; until the 1970s, it tended to be dismissed as trivial, easy, often ephemeral and fundamentally 'childish'. While adults might recall with pleasure the books they read as children, the idea that children's books could be studied seriously, for what they said about literature or, indeed, about childhood, was a radical one, which has taken time to gain ground. Yet it is arguably the case that children's literature is not merely one of the roots of Western literature and culture, but a foundation of shared intergenerational national and international culture, a barometer of beliefs and anxieties about children and childhood and a body of literature with its own genres, classic texts and avant-garde experiments. These features recommend it as an important area of interest for scholars, whether of literature, or of childhood, or of culture more generally.

These are exciting times for children's literature. The turn of the millennium has been a golden time for children's book publishing and associated art forms and industries. Arguably, children's books have achieved unprecedented public visibility, sales and popularity. A market which has traditionally been seen as mostly a matter of maintaining and republishing past established titles suddenly expanded into publishing new titles at an

unprecedented rate. The 1990s were characterised by huge market excitement about best-selling series fiction, and especially by the astonishing global phenomenon of Harry Potter, which suggested an unsuspected appetite in the modern child for reading at epic length. A children's author, Jacqueline Wilson, was hailed as the most borrowed author from British libraries and an International Library of Children's Literature opened in Tokyo. Another children's author, Philip Pullman, became the first winner of the Whitbread Prize with a children's book. The British post of Children's Laureate was inaugurated in 1999, filled initially by Quentin Blake, and in 2008 Jon Scieszka became the first Children's Laureate in the USA. Children's literature became a major category at literary festivals, with sell-out readings by famous authors. Book prizes for children's literature proliferated and children's authors were showered with honours, including honorary degrees from many universities. There was a renaissance in storytelling performances for children (and adults) in school and elsewhere, despite and alongside a proliferation of other media directed to children: television, film, DVDs, computer games and the internet, all of which presented fundamental challenges to traditional conceptions of reading, together with new narrative possibilities. The remit of children's literature extended into a burgeoning list of titles for young adults, and the success of crossover fiction, and picture books for older readers (most notably manga) suggested that there was a profound sea change taking place in the sense of what differentiated literature for the young from that for grown-ups.

Many books, old and new, were adapted to both stage and screen, in the aggregate enjoying phenomenal financial success (e.g. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was directed by Chris Columbus and released by Warner Brothers in 2001, with films of the sequels appearing every one or two years. Nicholas Hytner directed a two-part, six-hour performance of Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* at London's Royal National Theatre, 2003–4 (see Plate 20), the theatre adaptation of Jamila Gavin's *Coram Boy* transferred successfully from London to Broadway, New York in 2007 and the National Theatre's production of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse* enjoyed two sell-out seasons in 2007–8, transferring to the West End in 2009.) Places associated with classic children's writing boomed; there were unprecedented numbers of visitors to Beatrix Potter's house in the Lake District, to original sites for the film version of Hogwarts Academy, including Christ Church, Oxford, and to sites in Kent associated with Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh. The house on Prince Edward Island, Canada, which commemorates L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, draws 350,000 visitors each year. In 2005 the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre was opened in Buckinghamshire, and Newcastle opened an archive and visitors' centre,