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A World of Children's Books

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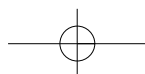
This chapter looks at:

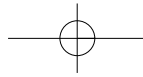
- > **Why enthusiasm for and enjoyment of children's books is so vital for everyone working with children and young people**
- > **The business of publishing**
- > **Ways to develop professional knowledge of children's books**



I have spent a lifetime enjoying, collecting and sharing children's books. Some of my earliest memories include my parents reading aloud to me and, now, one of my greatest pleasures is sharing books with others – children, colleagues and anyone else who is interested. Fortunately for me, introducing books to people – especially those who have chosen to work with children – is a professional responsibility. Throughout my career in education I have remained convinced that my knowledge of and delight in children's books has been central to any success I may have had in enabling young learners to become readers.

I hope that this book can be an introduction to the pleasures and power of writing and illustration for children. It aims to provide information about children's books for anyone who shares books with children and young people. It is particularly for those who are professionally involved in helping children to become confident, lifelong readers – for example, teachers, librarians,





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teaching assistants, foundation stage professionals, childminders and youth workers. It is essential that professionals who work with children are:

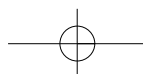
- > informed about the world of children's books
- > familiar with writers, illustrators and publishers for children
- > knowledgeable about the essential role that books play in children's intellectual, spiritual and moral development.

The most influential people in helping children to become readers are families and friends, so this book is also for them.

If, as education professionals, we are to fully comprehend the world of children's books, it will help to be aware of all the different points of view represented by people associated with that world. For example, educators and librarians are concerned with the creation of competent, confident readers; academics consider a range of theoretical perspectives that can offer alternative interpretations of a text; publishers, always hoping to discover a bestseller, work to produce popular titles; and authors and illustrators, absorbed in their creative art, endeavour to convey something of that enthusiasm to their readers. This introductory chapter will touch briefly on aspects and issues concerning the production of children's books under the subheadings of publishing, becoming a reader, and the development of a professional knowledge of children's books.

What are children's books?

A simple answer to the question 'What are children's books?' could be, books intended for readers under the age of 18. However, when you start to explore that statement it becomes clear that it is impossible to define children's books in such a straightforward way. There are as many different sorts of books for children as there are for adults – novels, information, poetry, dictionaries, short stories, travelogues, plays, biographies, annuals, and so on – in fact, there are multiple versions of each genre because, as a child of 6 is obviously not going to want to read the same books as a teenager, there are novels, information, poetry, and so on for each stage of childhood from infancy to the verge of adulthood. There is also variety within each genre; for example, the range of children's fiction includes contemporary and historical novels, science fiction, detective stories, fantasy adventure, horror and romance. When we describe a book as a story for children we must remember that most children's literature is concerned with storytelling. When we talk about Margery Williams's story about a lost toy, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, being a children's book we must remember that the same term is applied to *Doing It* by Melvyn Burgess (2003), a tale



of the sexual experiences of three boys in their late adolescence. In other words, to refer to children's books as a homogeneous group is incorrect and confusing: the range of subject matter, genres, literary quality, illustrative style is diverse and the impact of this diversity as significant as that associated with adult publishing.

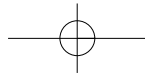
Publishing children's books

Another similarity between children's and adult publishing is the vast quantity of books produced every year. Relatively few of the hundreds of titles will be considered of any literary value and fewer still will become 'bestsellers'. There may be one or two exceptionally well-written and engaging books which will continue to be read and reread until they acquire 'classic' status. The thousands of children's books published annually are a testament to a very healthy children's book trade in the United Kingdom. With the coming of Harry Potter in 1997, writing for children became 'big business'. Currently, some children's books are supported by marketing teams with large promotion budgets, and a few successful authors become famous – one or two gaining the status of media stars. If books become very popular, film, television and theatre adaptations bring them to the attention of an even wider audience; as a result, spin-off products (such as computer games, toys, and so on) and lucrative advertising deals are always a possibility. However, for every 'star' children's author there must be a hundred who struggle to publish at all. Not many children's authors are wealthy, nor are the artists who illustrate children's books and create the brilliant visual genre, picturebook.

Trade and education

There are two sectors of publishing associated with child readers; trade and education. Trade publishers are the child equivalent of adult publishing; their market is the book-buying public, which includes specialists who buy for libraries and schools. Educational publishers produce textbooks, reading schemes and teaching resources; their market is schools and a few educationally aspirational parents. Debates about the teaching of reading have led to all sorts of misguided opinions and arguments about the differences between trade (sometimes termed 'real') books and educational materials. Most of the time, the arguments are pointless. The products from trade and education publishing serve completely different purposes.

Educational publishers provide functional 'tools' for teachers to use when teaching reading. There is a role for materials that provide attractive texts



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at appropriate times in a child's journey to becoming a competent reader but no one expects a riveting literary experience from *Here We Go* (Janet and John Book 1). Encounters with educational materials might promote in young readers personal pride in developing skills but those readers are unlikely to experience the deeply felt emotional responses that engagement with great literature can offer.

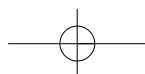
Books which deserve to be described as literature are provided by trade publishers. Although not intended to have any didactic purpose, there is no doubt that well-written and beautifully illustrated trade books can provide a most effective learning and enriching reading experience for young readers: not simply as a means by which they learn to read, but the stimulus and motivation for continuing to do so.

All publishers are businesses, they exist in order to sell books, but that does not mean that money is the only motivation in publishing. The majority of both children's and educational publishers want to produce books for children that meet the highest standards of writing, illustration and book production. However, a word of caution: all publishers' marketing departments recognize the value of sales to schools but they seldom understand how children learn to read. In the past, this has led to some misleading marketing techniques, notably the flagging up of suggested ages and curriculum levels on the backs of books. It is also important to realize that the multinational media corporations that wield a lot of power in the marketplace, have both education and trade sectors. Teachers, librarians and carers looking for certain sorts of books may not be aware of titles from smaller, independent publishers. It is a good idea to subscribe to the children's books journal such as *Carousel*, *Books for Keeps* or *School Librarian* (also see references for websites).

Learning to read

Proficient readers are seldom conscious of what cognitive processes they go through as they encounter a new text. However, if required to make explicit how they create meaning from a series of symbols strung together into words and organized into sentences, paragraphs and chapters, it is possible to identify three layers of understanding. All readers, to differing degrees, understand:

- > at the literal level – seeing and translating symbols into speech sounds and literal meanings
- > beyond the literal – applying knowledge, judgement and experience to the literal information



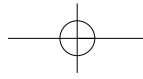
> at a personal level – an emotional response to the impact of the text (interest, boredom, delight, fear, anger, amusement, inspiration, annoyance, indifference) which, arguably, informs our understanding more deeply than any other aspect of reading.

The first engages the eye, the second the mind and the third the heart. Engagement of the heart distinguishes a reader from someone who is merely able to read. A good teacher of reading ensures that, right from the start, children learn not only how to read but about being a reader.

There are many books on the market which explore how to read, how to teach reading and how children become readers (for example, Appleyard, 1990; Jennings, 2003; Meek, 1991) a common factor in such texts is the recognition that good children's books have an essential role to play. It follows that anyone engaged in teaching children to read needs to be a reader themselves, and in particular, a reader of children's books. At the earliest stages of learning to read, a book's capacity to assist an inexperienced reader will often go hand in hand with its potential to engage the imagination. Once children can read to themselves, the quality of the books they read will have a direct influence over their motivation to read and an impact upon their future as readers. Having said that, adult involvement and enthusiasm is the key to developing young readers, and the value of adults reading aloud to children cannot be overestimated.

Reading aloud engages imaginations and inspires youngsters to pick up books for themselves. What better way can there be to teach the purposes of literacy than to demonstrate how it provides us all with enlightenment, comfort and delight?

There is research evidence (Medwell et al., 1998) that successful teachers of literacy engage their pupils in the pleasures of reading, ensuring that learning to read never becomes a chore and that, every day, books are shared for sheer enjoyment. Many other influential educationalists have indicated the importance of reading aloud to children (Graham, 2005; Meek, 1991; Perera, 1984) not just to enhance reading development but also to support writing and encourage thinking and debate. This simple truth about reading aloud to children has been understood by good teachers for years but it has not always been given sufficient focus in the literacy curriculum. However, since 2006, primary teachers in English schools are required to provide their classes with a 'read aloud programme' (DfES and PNS, 2006) which will require practitioners to keep up to date with children's books. As Aidan Chambers pointed out in 1993, all teachers of reading need a 'store' of at least 500 books that they can rely on at to support youngsters in becoming enthusiastic readers.



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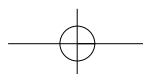
Providing the right books

It is not possible to categorize books according to the age or ability of a reader. Books are not related to stages of reading development, nor are they a means of measuring growing literacy skills. Terms such as 'easy' and 'difficult' are of little value when selecting books. Being able to read a book with ease should be encouraged. On the other hand, books can be too difficult for some inexperienced readers and enjoyment of both their burgeoning skills and the content of a book will be impeded by a text which is too demanding for them to read confidently. However, it is quite common for children to tackle linguistically challenging texts, and to gain pleasure from doing so, if the subject matter engages them. In contrast, many children have been put off reading because some well-intentioned adult has deemed their chosen reading materials to be too easy or too hard. Decisions on behalf of a child reader can only be made by someone who knows both the child and the book very well. With so many different opinions about books, how are teachers supposed to select suitable materials for the young readers in their care? Although there is plenty of advice available, nothing is as effective as a secure knowledge of books when helping children to make selections for themselves.

Developing a professional knowledge of children's books

As with many art forms, there can be a certain snobbishness in some people's opinions about 'good' books. This can lead to a lack of confidence in personal responses and a misconception about the difference between literary appreciation and personal enjoyment. There are many children's books which, in the words of the old cliché, have 'stood the test of time'. Referred to as classics, these books are outstanding for the time in which they were written; they are often engrossing narratives, even though the content and language are remote from the world inhabited by the modern reader. The tendency by some to refer to 'good' or 'significant' books can lead inexperienced readers to believe there are fixed views with which all readers agree. However, being a reader is not dependent on having read a prescribed list of books. All readers are entitled to have subjective opinions about what they read and no one person, or group of people, can determine the value of a piece of literature. It is impossible to decide the quality of a children's book without reading it – and even then personal opinion and taste will have a great deal to do with any judgement.

Some books which have even achieved 'classic' status are the cause of the greatest disagreements between established readers of children's books.



Take, for example, the work of Arthur Ransome. Many adults remember being totally absorbed by the sailing exploits of his child characters, while others find them irritating. Another example is the work of Tolkien, whose writing inspires some people to become passionate devotees, while others find such high fantasy uninteresting. There is no question that both Ransome and Tolkien are deserving of their reputations as authors but that does not mean that everyone will enjoy reading their work. It is possible to appreciate literary quality without emotional engagement. Describing books as 'good' or 'significant' should always prompt the further questions: 'Who has decided it is good?' and 'To whom is it significant?'

Suitable material for children

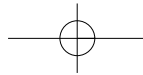
Opinions differ about what topics are suitable as the focus of a children's book. Some people argue that life is not always pleasant and that children's books should reflect reality. Others feel that young people should be protected from the disagreeable side of life, and have their innocence left unscathed for as long as possible. Both these views are to some degree didactic and neither take into account young readers' right to make their own decisions about what they read, to make choices about what interests them and to seek out books that will help them make sense of their worlds. That said, however, the majority of children will have their books selected for them, which is another reason why the adults who make the selections should read the books rather than be at the mercy of others' opinions. It is easy to be persuaded to think well or poorly of a book if you have not read it. Here, for example, is a synopsis of a story published for young children.

Peter, whose father has been killed whilst taking part in a robbery, is determined to get involved in similar criminal activity despite the pleas of his mother. The story starts as the lad sets out with the deliberate intention of stealing from an elderly neighbour. He breaks into the old man's property and steals some food. The rest of the story recounts the consequences of Peter's delinquency.

What is your initial response to this synopsis? Would it be appropriate for a 3-year-old? Most people would agree that the tales of Beatrix Potter, especially Peter Rabbit (for it is he) is a classic piece of literature for the very young. Here is another synopsis of the opening of another story:

A little girl is left in the care of a teenager who falls asleep. The little girl wanders away, down an unknown passageway where she finds and eats some tempting foodstuff which causes her to hallucinate.

The little girl is Alice, at the start of her Adventures in Wonderland. It is fun to play this game with famous books but it also serves to point out how



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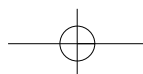
deceptive one person's opinion on a book can be. Reviewers and commentators on children's books can sometimes mislead. Although all sources of information and opinion are worth consulting, reading a book yourself is the only way of discovering whether or not it is 'good' or 'significant' for you. Once you have started to read, the decisive factor on which to base your judgement of a book is whether you want to finish it or not. What is it about the book that keeps you engaged or causes you abandon it? Why do we respond to some books and not others? Whatever the answer, we know that how we, as adult readers, respond has a direct bearing on how we convey that response to younger readers. A confident knowledge of children's books will enable you to make informed, critical judgements and to pass on to those with whom you work, not only your personal enthusiasms but an appropriate language for talking about literature. This book offers a starting point for enriching that knowledge.

What will you find in *Understanding Children's Books*?

This book is concerned with books for the whole span of childhood and is founded on the belief that there is writing of literary worth for children of all ages. Chapters consider books for babies, for children who are still learning to read and for young readers up to and beyond the age of 15. Children learning to read and becoming readers are themes which inevitably run through each chapter, however, the authors are concerned principally with the quality of the books that youngsters will meet rather than how texts are used as teaching resources. Colleagues from the worlds of education, libraries and publishing have been invited to contribute chapters on areas of personal interest and expertise.

All the contributors to *Understanding Children's Books* have two things in common; they are involved with young readers and they are passionate about children's books. Their different professional circumstances are reflected in their points of view but, no matter what field they represent, they all aspire to ensure that the adults who teach reading, introduce children to books and share the great stories of the world with young people are enthusiastic readers themselves, who know about children's books.

Most chapters contain book lists that make good starting points for anyone wanting to develop their knowledge of children's books. Inevitably, as the lists represent some of the best children's books available, there are several titles that appear on more than one list. Also, because there simply is not enough space, there are hundreds of titles that go unmentioned. Agreeing these lists has proved one of the most difficult things to do and it has been approached with much thought and considerable frustration



about what has had to be left out, and the titles offered may be out of print. However, you need only go to a library or good children's book shop to be offered more advice and below are listed some other useful sources of recommended titles.

Learning how to read and about being a reader begins as soon as we share books with children, no matter how young they are. Liz Attenborough (Chapter 2), Margaret Perkins (Chapter 3) and Vivienne Smith (Chapter 4) look at books which will support the very young through their earliest childhood and first few years of schooling. Learning to read can be hard work, but it is a lot harder if you never encounter the sort of literature and non-fiction that will engage you and motivate you to see the whole learning process as worthwhile.

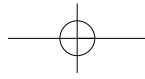
Writing about traditional tales (Chapter 5), Ann Lazim opens our eyes to the vast range of stories from across the world that have inspired both readers and writers for centuries. These tales are the heritage of every child; they also provide the foundations of all great literature and, as such, an essential element of literary experience for us all.

Fiction forms the heart of children's literature and it is novels written for children that Catriona Nicholson considers in Chapter 6. Since the late nineteenth century, a wealth of literature for young audiences has been produced across the English-speaking world. Nicholson reflects on the classics of the past and the 'state of the art' in the twenty-first century, when new media dominates our lives.

In Chapter 7, Gillian Lathey highlights how books in translation can open young minds to both the similarities and the differences of children's lives across the world. At the time when we are more globally aware, it is important to 'hear' voices from as many cultures as we can. Although in recent years – thanks in large part to the Marsh Award – more children's books are being translated into English, there is much to be done in opening up the world of literature for young readers.

In her chapter on non-fiction (Chapter 8), Nikki Gamble points out the high quality and distinction of many current information texts, which is made possible by the work of writers, artists and photographers engaged in illuminating the world for young readers. There is a wealth of books to appeal to the curious, the studious and to those who just prefer to read non-fiction.

Michael Lockwood (Chapter 9) considers the role of poetry in young lives and its power to encapsulate ideas, stories and feelings. He traces the history of poetry for children and comments on current views about the use



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of poetry with youngsters. Judith Graham (Chapter 10) opens our eyes to the potential of a relatively new genre of literature, the picturebook, and Mel Gibson (Chapter 11) continues the visual literacy with her exploration of graphic texts.

This introduction ends with a personal choice of books. They are books that I love; what makes them more precious is the knowledge that by sharing them with hundreds of children and colleagues, their potential to create and support new readers has been realized. I hope these books will also inspire the readers of *Understanding Children's Books* to share the magic of literature with all the aspiring young readers in their care.

Further reading

Prue's personal choice

Allan Ahlberg, *Burglar Bill*, Puffin

Anthony Browne, *The Tunnel*, Walker Books

Quentin Blake, *The Story of the Dancing Frog*, Red Fox

Carol Ann Duffy, *The Stolen Childhood*, London: Puffin

Russell Hoban and Quentin Blake, *How Tom beat Captain Najork and his Hired Sportsmen*, Jonathan Cape

Margaret Mahy, *The Great Piratical Rumbustification and The Librarian and the Robbers*, Puffin

Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, *The Stinky Cheese Man*, Puffin

Morag Styles and Helen Cook, *Ink-Slinger*, A & C Black

Martin Waddell, *Farmer Duck*, Walker Books

Marcia Williams, *Archie's War*, Walker Books

Useful websites

Websites to find out more about children's books

www.achuka.co.uk

www.booksforkeeps.co.uk

www.booktrusted.org.uk

www.carouselguide.co.uk

www.fcbg.org.uk

www.readingzone.com

www.sla.org.uk

www.writeaway.org.uk

