



# Studying Children's Literature

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**Margaret Meek** on the 'Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature' series.

Now that children's literature is a respected subject of advanced study, students look for 'specialist' guides to the books they are bound to read. They also look for experienced critics to help them to select primary texts, and to understand the relevance of history and culture to literature more generally. The new series from Continuum, 'Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature', offers this kind of support. **Margaret Meek** assesses its contribution. <!--break-->

Five volumes in the 'Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature' series have already appeared; one, **Frightening Fiction**, was reviewed in **BfK** No.130. The common features of the books are: an introductory overview of the theme, three or four chapters about individual writers or linked commentaries about authors and books. There are also references, bibliographies and an index. The patterning of the theme and critical approaches are refractions of the skills of the individual 'international experts'.

## Children's books about families

**Family Fictions** encompasses the traditional scope of children's fiction, reflecting the relations of children and parents, doctrinal and social divisions, the evolution of book production over time, and readers' opportunities to encounter the influence of outstanding thinkers and artists. The Introduction offers a short, conventional history of children's books about families, where the themes are poverty, class distinction, mother-child relations, and the increased contemporary awareness of abandonment, disaffections and social abuse, in both UK and US examples. Betsy Byars' stories are examined in some depth. There is, however, a definite imbalance between this overview and the more detailed accounts of only three contemporary writers, two of whom, Wilson and Gleitzman, are remarkably similar.

Nicholas Tucker produces convincing evidence that Anne Fine is 'the most uncompromising of authors'. He sees her as 'capable of sending back dispatches to the adult world about the current state of childhood of a quality that simply demands to be heard and a truthfulness that has to be heeded'. This account of a range of books examined in some depth lets the reader see there is no sure way to guarantee safety and happiness for young children or teenagers, in books as in life. Tucker says that hope is 'hard won' in Fine's novels, but it is there. Dialogue, Fine's strongest skill, carries the onward thrust of the plots. The psychological insights that have always distinguished Tucker's writing about children's books come to the fore in his presentation of Jacqueline Wilson as a writer who never tells children what to think. Hitherto my reading of her work has been compromised by the generation gap between her characters and my interest in them, but I take the point that she can 'offer readers a complete spectrum of their own emotional highs and lows'.

Nikki Gamble has farther to go with Morris Gleitzman to persuade me that he needs serious explication. I appreciate the display of modernist quirkiness in his stories, and recognise children's need for 'another of the same'. But thoughtful students must encounter sharper, more cogent criticism of what is at stake in books where adults are seen to have the power to make decisions, when children can only comment and not be heard.

## Fantasy fiction

**Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction** is a tightly packed volume of critical analysis of narratives where the laws of nature are suspended or amended. Beginning in the depth of folklore, fantasy seems to defy definition and categorization and challenges what usually counts as reality. Here the authors compress what other commentators have said about the history and range of fantasy before analysing the books of three of the most innovative practitioners of the genre, whose work has always had close attention. The critics assume that their readers have already some acquaintance with the texts. In his introduction, Peter Hunt shows how serious writers, having absorbed past examples of the genre, reinvent it.

Millicent Lenz says that **The Wizard of Earthsea** is about personal death, and how a young man may learn wisdom and pass it on to others. After setting the trilogy in its tradition, she proceeds to trace the psychological development of the characters, as a way of 'portraying the author's creation process'. Her detailed exegesis pays sensitive tribute to Le Guin's imaginative power. But for young readers and critics to be at home in Earthsea, they have first to know how the story goes, before plunging into its depths. Lenz also writes about 'His Dark Materials', by Philip Pullman, who currently receives most critical attention for high seriousness and narrative daring. Lenz traces the antecedents of this epic, saying that the subject is 'nothing less than the story of how human beings, at this time in history, might evolve a higher level of consciousness'. So far, we have had adult responses to this creation. Young readers bring to it their cyberspace understanding of parallel worlds so we need their versions. The way to recover the power and glory of extended metaphor of 'alternative worlds' lies open, so these remarkable books should not be overwritten with interpretive commentary. This is a good place for adult readers who find children's literature less than 'the real thing' to meet an amazing writer in the hands of a steadfast critic.

Hunt's chapter on Terry Pratchett is a splendid example of how to write about modern fantasy that combines the speed of radio or TV comic badinage with unexpected phrases that turn the reader's thinking over to consider the improbable. He makes an important claim, that 'text and the single reader's imagination are no longer what the reading experience is about'. Now, 'combining' imaginations 'form a fluid, corporate fantasy' in the alternative worlds of modern childhood, where children play computer games that encourage them to make their own moral decisions and to invent ways of implementing them. Pratchett's Discworld is the place to try this out.

## **The nature of war**

**Children at War** is the most dramatic, coherent and readable of these three volumes. It shows how the format of the series allows the authors scope to explore a range of textual forms on the same theme. Careful attention to detail invites speculative understanding about the nature of war, a topic that engages many writers and young readers. The authors' sources include popular journalism, storypapers (comics), school stories, poems, memoirs and picture books. Their decision to summarize important narratives at length and to allow 'the texts to speak for themselves through quotation' gives the book its distinctive character.

Geoff Fox's overview moves from late 19th-century adventures for boys, all jingoism, confident national identity and playing field metaphors, to the ambivalences in tales of recent conflicts. He chooses a German book, **No Hero for the Kaiser**, to present the impact of war on ordinary people. He redeems the comics of WW2 as 'economically told, fairly demanding in vocabulary and accurate in syntax' and finds, in later Chalet School stories, anti-Nazism and European unity firmly promoted. By his command of detail, his range of sympathy and his skill in weaving narratives into a 'lived' account of their time, he shows how authors read wars, beyond the actions to the historical and cultural complexities that provoke them. He extends his share of books about WW2 to include some from mainland Europe, so as to offer his readers 'a more ambivalent experience of war, usually from the standpoint of the victims'.

Writing about recent novels, Kate Agnew links the horrors of events and the protagonists' notions of a kindly moral self, as in **War Game**, where the disorganised, friendly football match is contrasted with the hideous, disorganised conflict in the trenches. Her account is an example of 'new' reading, where the words and the pictures extend the meaning by discordance, rather than matching. Other strong examples show how, in wartime, children have to take on adult responsibilities but without the necessary, accompanying power. Discussing **The Machine Gunners** Agnew shows that the children 'have done nothing more evil than to mimic the adult world, recreating it more successfully than it created itself'. The intensity of these war books has found favour with teenage readers in ways that these two

insightful critics describe acutely and accurately. Together they make a strong case for the importance of the topic in a rounded, scholarly volume that indicates their commitment to children's books more generally.

Altogether, it is clear that this is a publishing venture that promises well.

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### **Books discussed**

**Family Fictions: Anne Fine, Morris Gleitzman, Jacqueline Wilson and others**

### **HHH**

Nicholas Tucker and Nikki Gamble, 128pp, 0 8264 4878 X

**Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction: Ursula Le Guin, Terry Pratchett, Philip Pullman and others**

### **HHH**

Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz, 184pp, 0 8264 4937 9

**Children at War: from the First World War to the Gulf**

### **HHHH**

Kate Agnew and Geoff Fox, 200pp, 0 8264 4848 8

Continuum 'Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature' series, £14.99 each pbk

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