



The American Connection

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Aidan Chambers considers the American contribution to children's books.

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If by some unholy magic an evil genie suddenly vamoosed every American (by which I mean U.S.) children's book from Britain we would all of us, adults as well as young readers, find our lives astonishingly deprived. For the plain fact is that we cannot do without them. The American contribution to our children's literature is essential to the reading enjoyment, not to mention the literary development, of British young people. You have only to run through a list of the most obvious and well-known titles to acknowledge the truth of this. Think, for example, of **Where the Wild Things Are**, and of **Huckleberry Finn**, of **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** and **Charlotte's Web**, of **The Pigman**, **The Eighteenth Emergency** and of those indestructible **Little Women**... we could go on like this for the rest of my space.

What is it they bring us, these fine books from across the Atlantic that match the best of our own? All kinds of things. They add immeasurably to the variety we can offer, of course, like the enlargement of any family. A strong and sometimes more exciting and inventive sense of design, especially in picturebooks. An attractive and open-hearted sense of humour; if it weren't for the American imports our children's books would be pretty short on laughter.

Take a look at **Frog and Toad are Friends** by Arnold Lobel (World's Work/I Can Read Series) and see all these qualities at work along with others. What strikes me at once about these stories of the bosom pals, sensible and faithful Frog and scatty, likeable Toad, is the high standard of every aspect of the book, from the choice of paper (a gentle cream, not the dreadful, glaring and bleached-to-death white that's forced onto us these days) to the subtlety of the colour printing. Words, pictures, design: all work together. In short, the same care and attention have been expended as would be given to a major picturebook. It has not been thought of by author-artist or publisher as `merely' a supplementary `reader'. Far from regarding this kind of work as beneath him or diminishing his talent, what reaches you is Lobel's relaxed and enthusiastic pleasure in writing and drawing for children just starting to read for themselves. Until recently it was hard to find British writers and illustrators of Lobel's gifts who would even think of attempting literature of this order. The Ahlbergs are now our most obvious and successful comparison.

In America, however, Lobel is far from alone. As early as 1952 Maurice Sendak co-operated with Ruth Krauss in a book, **A Hole is to Dig**, that set standards for beginning readers that are still unsurpassed. At the other extreme of nature and kind and as valuable in their own way are the rhyming ruckuses of Dr Seuss, marking a high point in child-appealing anarchy. We have no match at all for Seuss.

It is this easy acceptance of the worth of writing for children in the awkward process of learning to read that I find totally admirable. And it sets the tone, I think, for all writing for children in the U.S.A. Indeed it comes from an American quality which affects the whole of their literature. I mean the quality of openness to the reader. Richard Hoggart helped sort this out in a fascinating article, `Finding a Voice', which is included in his book **Speaking to Each Other**. Vol 2: About Literature

(Chatto). America is geographically and numerically huge, a nation composed comparatively recently from people from many nations, many cultures, many languages. No writer there dare assume a common store of references, a sharing of assumptions, whether literary, social, or of any other kind. The problem, then, for an American writer was and still is to find a voice that is open to all, which draws in the reader, which without condescension or presumptuousness, makes plain whatever aspects of the story the writer wants the reader to understand.

One way to solve this problem, of course, is to use the first person colloquial style, which puts the protagonist directly in touch with the reader, and makes it easy for the writer to say, in effect, 'Look, I don't know who you are, but I've got this story I want to tell you and this is what you need to know about... me [the protagonist]... and where I come from... and the sort of person I am...' and so on. And as when telling anything to strangers there is an instinctive understanding that they must be kept entertained, and there must be humorous and dramatic engagements that bind teller and readers together 'above the head', so to speak, of the story itself.

In short, American writers are preoccupied as much with the *how* of the story as with the *what*. They seem to me much more concerned with the craft of their art than are most English writers. The two key books in all this from our point of view are **Huckleberry Finn** and **Catcher in the Rye**. In them we see the American use of the first person, and the American way of striking up a relationship between author/narrator and reader at its freest and richest. There is no sense of inhibition, no sign of authorial anxiety about the colloquial and unliterary style. You take Huck and Holden Caulfield as they are, or leave them alone - and they make no bones about who and what they are. But if you decide to stay with them, they put themselves out to entertain, to explain, and to keep you interested. If there is anything American writers and American characters hate, it is the idea that they might be boring.

All this - drawing the reader in, finding a way of telling the story that includes rather than excludes readers - describes exactly what a children's writer anywhere, in any language, must do, or at least must make decisions about. Those authors who exclude, like William Mayne, make uneasy, often adult-read children's authors. Those who seek to include - Betsy Byars in all her books and Philippa Pearce in **The Battle of Bubble and Squeak** are good U.S. and British examples - seem to be by nature children's writers and find a wide audience.

The problem with English literature as a whole is that it excludes, for reasons Richard Hoggart explains well. And that is why our children's books and writers are often uneasy beings, not quite sure whether they are meant to be demotic, and reader-focused, or inward-looking and meant only for those who are already in-the-know. The fact that American Literature as a whole has to be inclusive of disparate people and readers means that American children's writers agonize less about their role and status as writers. They feel more confident of what they are doing, and that confidence infects their work so that we here find ourselves using of it words like 'uninhibited', 'relaxed', 'appealing', 'approachable', 'well judged', 'vigorous'.

Two qualities, then, so far that I find attractive: an enthusiastic attitude to writing *for* children, and an interest in the art of bringing the reader into the book. Now a third: a willingness, even an eagerness to tackle 'difficult' topics, to break down taboos and inhibitions about certain subjects, and to widen the narrative style, the ways in which the stories about those subjects are told. Sometimes the Americans can be too opportunistic and organised than is pleasing in this regard. But that is the weak side of a great strength. Let them decide that too little attention has been given to girls in glasses and *wham!* within a year there are x number of novels about girls in glasses.

But the best side of this quality has given us, to take just one example, a ground-breaking picturebook, really a psychological picture-novel: **Where the Wild Things Are**. So great was the resistance to it in this country that it took four years before that far-sighted publisher, Judy Taylor, persuaded The Bodley Head, against all advice, to bring it across the Atlantic. It has been a bestseller ever since and has become a classic of the art of picturebook making. At the other end of the age range, in writing for teenagers, where the Americans always have been and still are so much more innovative and committed than we English, Robert Cormier has produced three books which explore political subjects in increasingly direct ways. His first, **The Chocolate War**, uses the well-known (and English rather than American) form of the school story to deal with fascist totalitarianism in its modern expression - subjugation and bullying of the mind. His third novel, **After the First Death**, openly treats of terrorism.

In other words. American children's writers respond much more sensitively and easily to social changes, and to changes of thought, and find ways of interpreting them to children. Consider, for example. their response to ethnic minorities and oppression. Rosa Guy. Virginia Hamilton, Julius Lester. Rachel Isadora, Louise Fitzhugh, Ezra Jack Keats, and many others working both in novels for the young and in picturebooks - most of them belonging to the racial minorities or oppressed themselves - have brought racial questions to the centre of their work without loss of literary values. How many similar writers can you name who deal with the same kinds of subject matter here and do it as well, and come themselves from the ethnic groups that now form a part of British life: blacks, Asians, Chinese, and the rest' How much of today's British society do we find in British children's *literature*? We all know the answer: too little. In this, we compare unfavourably with the Americans and learn from them.

We are changing slowly. While we do, American children's books fill the gaps, influence us, often show us the way. I do not, however, want to make it seem that the literary trade is all in one direction. It isn't. But it has to be said that in this respect as in some others we British are more prepared to take from the U.S.A. than they are to take from us. Americans are still too ready to complain about the 'difficulty' of many British children's writers, about their being - God save us! - too English. Being so used to writing that makes immediate appeals, that gives itself to the reader, they seem unwilling to deal with - perhaps do not know enough about how to help their children enjoy - books that ask the reader to give him/herself to the narrative. They could learn something from us, perhaps, in discovering how to do that.

All of which means, quite simply, that we need each other's literature, and to know about each other's skills in bringing books to children. The exchange is fruitful.

A Personal Choice

Aidan Chambers selects a few American children's books he personally enjoys and which he feels demonstrate the kind of qualities he talks about in his article. He emphasises that his list is in no way either representative or comprehensive.

Millions of Cats

Wanda Gag (Faber, 0 571 05361 0, £2.25: Picture Puffin 0 14 050.168 1, 85p)

Before the 1920s the USA had few picturebooks of its own; they bought from Europe. Gag's black-and-white treatment of this old tale was a turning point in 1928 and remains a sampler of classic qualities in picturebook making.

Noisy Nora

Rosemary Wells (Picture Lions, 0 00 661465 5, 90p)

Noisy because her younger brother and older sister get all the attention while `Nora had to wait'. The result is a tantrum and a little book that again demonstrates how good the Americans are at the learning-to-read stage: funny, accurately observed, a rhyming text that exactly suits the witty pictures.

Ben's Trumpet

Rachel Isadora (Angus and Robertson. 0 207 95944 7, £3.95)

A black-and-white picturebook for the over sevens. Ben plays an imaginary trumpet, aping his hero in the jazz club. The other kids jeer but imagination and determination win through. Colour print is ever more expensive; it is time to recover the b. and w. tradition. When handled with as much inventive skill as here, no one ought to complain.

Outside Over There

Maurice Sendak (Bodley Head, 0 370 30403 9, £5.95)

The presiding genius of American children's books gave us in 1981 the promised third major work to go with **Where the Wild Things Are** and **In the Night Kitchen**. We are all still trying to cope with the gift: how to read it? How to bring it to children (and which ones)? The questions are worth answering and deserve the time they take. Sendak, after all, spent years making the book.

Flat Stanley

Jeff Brown (Methuen, 0 416 80360 1, £3.50; Magnet, 0 416 57290 1, 75p)

Now a touchstone in judging what's just right for children at the stage on from learning-to-read: everything is right - the humour, the length, the size of print, the amount of print in relation to the simple illustrations. Stanley is flattened when his pinboard falls on him; thereafter he has flattened adventures being posted by air mail and recovering objects from drains, etc. A witty text too.

The Shrinking of Treehorn

Florence Parry Heide (Kestrel, 0 7226 5458 8, £2.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.0746 X, 75p)

When he starts shrinking, Treehorn experiences the full force of human foible when his parents, friends and teachers refuse to take his plight seriously. In a short time the book has proved itself a classic of satiric children's fiction-with-pictures, able to appeal from 5 to adulthood.

Little House in the Big Woods

Laura Ingalls Wilder, (Methuen, 0 416 07130 9, £4.50; Puffin, 0 14 03.0194 1, 85p)

First published in 1932 and based on Wilder's memories of life in pioneer days. Its openhearted sentiment (which the English are wary of in their own work but enjoy in American where it seems natural and 'right') makes a strong appeal to children of 8 to 13 or so. The Americans can be superb at innocent domesticity lived out in rural settings, and this book and the others that followed it epitomize that quality.

Harriet the Spy

Louise Fitzhugh, (Gollancz, 0 575 01808 9, £4.50; Lions, 0 00 671002 6, 85p)

Harriet sets out to spy on adults and friends and records her discoveries in her diary. Caused a scandal when it appeared in the U.S. in 1965: squads of would-be Harriets gave adults a bad time. Was this why it took ten years for the book to come here? When it did, however, all was well and the book slipped into a respectable niche as an amusing story.

Iggie's House

Judy Blume, (Piccolo, 0 330 26682 9, £1.00)

The enfant terrible of U.S. children's authors (though not *so enfant* now) Blume gets attacked almost as much by librarians and teachers in the U.S. as Blyton does here. Is almost slick in her skill at drawing in the young reader; and seems to relish getting into each book a 'taboo' subject. This story tells of a white girl's relationship with a black family who move into a middle class white housing estate. If the treatment is a little pat, the subject demands attention and Blume touches on it honourably.

The Night Swimmers

Byars, (Bodley Head, 0 370 30317 2, £3.75; Puffin, 0 14 03.14091. £1.00: This autumn)

Byars and Blume are close in narrative skills but for my money Byars is the stayer, and this novel about a 13-year-old girl left to cope with her brothers at night by a country-western singing father has an admirable elegance and the usual Byars qualities of humour and precision of observation.

Tuck Everlasting

Natalie Babbitt, (Chatto, 0 7011 5095 5, o/p: Lions, 0 00 671484 6, 65p)

Babbitt's work is both fine-grained and full-blooded. In this story of the time-trapped Tuck family, she has made a fantasy that appeals to a wide range of readers.

Fifteen

Beverly Cleary, (Puffin, 0 14 03.0948 9, 90p)

The now famous and still enthusiastically read story of Jane Purdy's first real date with a boy. The pubescent novel in essence, a story told with humour and not a hint of embarrassment: the kind of thing the Americans have always done well (**Little Women**) and we never quite manage to achieve with so light a touch.

Slake's Limbo

Felice Holman, (Macmillan Educational Topliners, 0 333 28305 8, £3.95)

One of the best early teenage novels recently come from America that I know and far too little attended to yet. Slake is a put-upon New York 13 yr old who finally hides himself in the tunnel of a subway where he sets up a kind of urban Robinson Crusoe life and learns to survive and conquer his inadequacies and fear. Minute detail of his life becomes almost obsessively compulsive to read about.

A Wizard of Earthsea

Ursula Le Guin, (Gollancz, 0 575 00717 6, 0.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.0477 0, t 1.00)

Fantasy or SF? Whatever, a finely wrought tale (with two companion volumes) that charts in narrative events the Jungian trip. People get hooked on it as firmly as on Tolkien.

M. C. Higgins the Great

Virginia Hamilton, (Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 89214 7, £3.50)

I am still trying to appreciate Hamilton's writing. She deals in the black experience and writes in a voice as personal and idiosyncratic as her stories are. M.C. is a kind of Simon Stylites, and symbols, I think, work hard as a subtext. One day someone will write a really helpful critical essay about Hamilton and then I'll understand.

I Am the Cheese

Robert Cormier, (Gollancz, 0 575 02372 4; £4.95; Lions, 0 00 671485 4, 95p)

The hidden state, the controlling bureaucracy - CIA, MI5, KGB - and a boy whose life is being remade to a different history. But you don't know that, as he doesn't, till nearly the end. Cormier is fascinated by narrative technique as well as by politics. He brings the two together in never less than impressive novels. Many people regard this one as his best so far.

Aidan Chambers was a teacher before becoming a full-time writer. With his American wife, Nancy, he has just been awarded the Eleanor Farjeon Award for distinguished services to children's books. Together they launched the journal **Signal** from which have grown Signal Publications (useful bookguides) and the Signal Poetry Award. Aidan has lectured and written about books (his **Introducing Books to Children** is still a most sensible and practical guide to the art), compiled anthologies of stories and originated Macmillan's Topliner series. He also finds time to write fiction and his latest novel, **Dance on My Grave** has just been published by the Bodley Head in their New Adult paperback series (0 370 30366 0, £4.25).

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