

Boys and Girls Forever: Children's Classics from Cinderella to Harry Potter.
By Alison Lurie. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. 219 pp.

This collection of fourteen essays makes a useful companion and sequel to Lurie's earlier collection *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (1990). Most the essays first appeared in slightly different form in the *New York Review of Books* or as essay reviews in *The New York Times Book Review*. Like her previous collection which tied a wide range of essays together under the broad thesis that outstanding examples of children's texts tend to be subversive, or at least run counter to the status quo, Lurie provides a general umbrella introduction which argues that some of the most gifted writers for children are those authors who were able to remain children throughout their adulthood, or who preferred children to adults as companions, despite their chronological age. The essays on J. M. Barrie and E. Nesbit that were published in *Don't Tell the Grown-ups* would be more appropriate in *Boys and Girls Forever*, just as the essays on Louisa May Alcott and Dr. Seuss in this collection would thematically fit the thesis of the first volume. Both collections of independent essays have grown a bit like Topsy, evolving out of Lurie's own reading and research interests which is both part of their charm and limitations. Those seeking a more systematic approach to children's literature are advised to look elsewhere. While viewing successful children's writers as adults who never grew up is not the most original critical thesis, it does provide Lurie with a useful frame for examining distinctive writers such as Hans

Christian Andersen, L. Frank Baum, Dr. Seuss and Tove Jansson. The focus of the collection is children's literature, but at least a third of the essays deal with authors of literary fairy tales. Perhaps the most useful essay in the collection for those interested in fairy tales is "What Fairy Tales Tell Us" which first appeared as an introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Fairy Tales* (1993). Here Lurie makes a distinction between those literary fairy tales produced in the United States and their European counterparts. She views European literary fairy tales as occurring in a fixed world where the social system remains unchanged, while American fairy tales frequently critique the existing social order and have little to recommend wealth, position, and good looks.

Lurie develops these distinctions in more detail in "The Oddness of Oz" written in recognition of the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). She shows how Baum's fairy tale reflects the geographic landscape and cultural values of the United States. She argues that Baum was strongly influenced by the political thought of his mother-in-law Matilda Gage, who posited a prehistoric matriarchal society in her *Woman, Church and State* (1895). Lurie observes that in the *Oz* series all the good societies are ruled by women and that more often than not the male rulers are either wicked or weak. The land of Oz is ruled by a female trinity of Glinda, Ozma, and Dorothy. These female characters make a sharp break with European children's fantasy as well as the many realistic characters found in books for girls of the same period. Lurie maintains these innovations are what have attracted a strong readership of girls for the *Oz* series.

Lurie finds a similar strand of strong female characters in Jansson's *Moomintroll* books which she contrasts with the more male-dominated world of A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories. What Lurie finds remarkable about Jansson's strange and eccentric texts is her ability to extend sympathy for even her most unlikable characters.

The essays that prove to be most interesting are those that deal with once popular, but now overlooked writers, such as Walter de la Mare and John Masefield. Using Theresa Whistler's *Imagination of the Heart: The Life of Walter de la Mare* (1993) as the springboard for the essay, Lurie makes a strong case for the literary merit of de la Mare's fairy-tale collections *Broomsticks and Other Tales* (1925) and *The Lord Fish and Other Tales* (1933). She also reminds readers that de la Mare's *The Three Mulla-Mulgars* (1910) was an important source for J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937). Lurie also attempts to redirect contemporary readers to Masefield's *The Midnight Folks* (1927) and its sequel *The Box of Delights* (1935). While Lurie celebrates both de la Mare and Masefield's prose, she finds little reason to revive their poetry.

Lurie is best at locating overlooked writers of merit, and her essays on well-known contemporary authors are less compelling. The essay on Salman

Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) primarily interprets the story autobiographically, and the essay on J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series mainly rebuts the concerns that conservative Christians have raised about the use of magic and witchcraft in the popular series.

These essays are intended for the general reader rather than a specialist. They function as useful introductions to significant and sometimes overlooked children's writers. While they are gracefully written, they tend to be synthesis of existing scholarship. Like introductions that appear in academic editions of texts, these essays summarize the life of the author and provide a cultural and biographical context for their literary achievements. Lurie continues to be one of the few literary critics who consistently publishes on children's texts and authors in mainstream journals. *Don't Tell the Grown-ups* is a pivotal text in the critical study of children's literature and its publication helped to legitimate the scholarly field of children's literature by literary scholars. Like Roger Sale's *Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E. B. White* (1978), Lurie's *Don't Tell the Grown-ups* helped convince academics that there was serious merit in studying children's literature. Since its publication, Lurie's first collection of essays has inspired numerous critics to view children's literature a field of academic study. Consequently the critical study of children's literature is much expanded due in large part to Lurie's earlier work. As a result, *Boys and Girls Forever* will have less of an impact than Lurie's first collection. Nevertheless, *Boys and Girls Forever*, just as *Don't Tell the Grown-ups*, is a good starting point for any reader who wishes to critically evaluate children's books.

Jan Susina
Illinois State University