

**Editor's Note: Kiddie Lit(e):  
The Dumbing Down  
of Children's Literature**

The dumbing down of children's literature may be symptomatic of a larger cultural issue that Paul Fussell addressed in *BAD: Or, the Dumbing of America* (1991). According to Fussell, what makes an object BAD, or dumbled down, is that it "is something phoney, clumsy, witless, untalented, vacant, or boring," yet a gullible public is convinced that the item is genuine, and even valuable (13). For Fussell, dumbing down goes beyond mere bad taste; it needs to exhibit elements of pretentiousness or be overvalued. In other words, a gap must exist between what is said about an object and what the object actually is. The essence of dumbing down is overstatement and simple-minded literalism, which Fussell warns paves the way for the new illiteracy, as well as the "blockbuster" mentality. Clearly children's literature is not immune to this phenomenon.

Nor is it a recent phenomenon to the field of children's literature. Ever since John Newbery published *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in 1744, with the accompanying "Ball and Pincushion, the Use of which will infallibly make Tommy a good Boy and Polly a good Girl," children's literature has been a field that regularly combines both art and commerce. It was Newbery's remarkable ability to sell children's books, not his skills as an author or illustrator, that made his reputation. According to S. Roscoe in *John Newbery and His Successors* (1973), Newbery is considered to be the first British publisher of children's books "to make a permanent and profitable market for them, to make a class of book to be taken seriously as a recognised and important branch of the book-trade" (9). Putting John Locke's educational theories into practice, Newbery promoted Locke's concept of "instruction with delight" using as his motto "*Delectando monemus*," which he prominently displayed on the frontispiece of *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*. However, Newbery's attitude toward children's publishing is neatly summarized by his slogan "Trade and Plumb Cake for ever! Huzza!" that appears on the frontispiece of *Twelfth Day Gift* (1767). Newbery's genius was in developing the fairly new product category, children's books, through his frequent advertise-

ments in the press and his clever ploy of introducing additional titles and products into the body of his children's books. The most notorious example is the tragic death of Goody Two-Shoes's father in *The Renowned History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765) for the lack of Dr. James's Powder, the popular patent medicine Newbery produced. Newbery seems to have anticipated the now-common practice of paid product endorsement in films by two hundred years.

In honoring John Newbery, for whom the annual Newbery Medal is named and which is given for the outstanding contribution to American literature for children, those involved in children's literature acknowledge it as both a field of literature and a commercial enterprise. Children's book publishing remains an industry somewhere between "instruction with delight" and "trade and plumb cake." Commercial and market considerations have always been important factors in the creation of children's literature. Consequently, the examination of the ideological uses of children's texts and subsequent production of meaning for younger readers is one of the primary goals of the study of children's literature. As a field of literary study that is still attempting to define itself, and what it does, the very term "children's literature" remains open to debate. It is revealing that one of the best known descriptions of what constitutes a children's book is John Rowe Townsend's observation in *A Sense of a Story* (1971) "a book which appears on the children's list of a publisher" (10), a definition that neatly links the world of culture and the world of commerce.

For those concerned with children's literature, the term "kiddie lit," with its wholesale dismissal of children's literature as a significant and important aspect of literary studies, is disturbing and shortsighted. While Fussell argues that the dumbing down of America is visible in many unexpected places, he surprisingly does not address the issue of children's books in his study of the dumbing down of American culture, although he does decry the tendency to refer to children as kids. Fussell is not alone in this omission. Neither Lewis Coser, Charles Kadushin, and Walter Powell's *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* (1982) nor James West's *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace since 1900* (1988) give much attention to the children's book industry. Although it is dated, Robin Gottlieb's *Publishing Children's Books in America, 1919-1976* (1978) remains the best source of information on the subject.

Despite the introduction and serious examination of film, popular culture, ethnic, and minority texts into literary studies, many students and colleagues continue to view skeptically the study of children's literature, taking the phrase as an oxymoron. Instead of being seen as a contradiction

in terms, perhaps children's literature should be viewed as a test case for all literary texts in that children's books are a more open and obvious mix of artistic, educational, and commercial ideologies. From John Newbery to Chris Whittle's "Channel One," children's media continues to be a market-driven commodity produced by the culture industry and influenced to a large degree by parents and educators who make selections for children. To make sense of children's texts, critics are obligated to look beyond the texts themselves to those cultural and social forces that help produce and generate their sales.

Children's literature is currently undergoing another "golden age" in popularity, production, and sales. According to *Book Industry Trends, 1992*, there was a 76 percent growth of children's book stores last year, second only to the growth of fast food restaurants. Judith Rosen notes in a 1992 issue of *Publisher's Weekly* that children's books are the largest growth area in publishing today. The number of independent children's bookstores in the U.S. has increased from 215 in 1985 to 500. Major bookstore chains—B. Dalton, Waldenbooks, Barnes and Noble—are opening specialized children's bookstores and publishers are aggressively selling books through children's book clubs.

So while the dumbing down of children's literature has always been an aspect of the children's book industry, it appears in recent years to have become more pronounced. Accompanying this increased demand for children's literature is the trivialization of texts and the cartooning of illustrations. This current trend of writing down to younger readers comes in many forms: be they abridgements, imitations, celebrity authors, or cinematic versions of texts. Children's books have become big business and in some cases, like the food that is served in many fast food restaurants, children's literature has evolved into a kind of educational junk food, a sort of "kiddie lite."

Nor has this trend gone unnoticed in the popular press. Tom Engelhardt complained in a 1991 issue of *Harper's* that "Reading May Be Harmful to Your Kids: In the Nadirland of Today's Children's Books." Katha Pollitt criticized the proliferation of what she has termed the "Smurfette Principle" in children's media in a 1991 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. The current flap between the FCC and local television stations on whether programs such as *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Flintstones* constitute "educational and informational" children's television is symptomatic of the continued battle among the commercial, educational, and artistic forces at work in defining children's culture.

This issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn* grew out of a Children's Literature Division session at the 1991 MLA in San Francisco and the

subsequent discussions that resulted. In the following nine essays, critics of children's literature, writers of children's books and textbooks, book editors, and concerned parents explore the various aspect of dumbing down of children's texts. What I found particularly valuable in compiling this collection is the diversity of viewpoints. Sharon Shaloo explores how children's books are marketed to the parents of young children. Elizabeth Law and David Galef, as book editor and author respectively, trace the publishing process of children's books. Julie Brown and Robert Brown examine how children's textbooks are produced. Anne Lundin and Joel Chaston both focus on the issue of imitation in children's texts and illustrations. Richard Flynn looks at the pedagogical implications behind recent children's poetry anthologies. Judith Kellogg traces the gradual watering down of the Arthurian legends in contemporary children's books, while A. Waller Hastings critiques the Disney film adaptation of "The Little Mermaid."

It is my intention that this special issue will aid readers in examining the greater cultural forces that help produce children's texts. My thanks go to the writers and to Louisa Smith and Jack Zipes, the editors of *The Lion and the Unicorn*, for making this issue possible.

Jan Susina

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