



A History of Children's Books in 100 Books

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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It needs strong wrists, but this large, sumptuous book containing over 250 colour illustrations is certainly worth a look. Not exactly scholarly, with too many repetitions and some careless inaccuracies, it still brings a fresh eye to children's literature mostly past but some present primarily from Britain but touching on the rest of the world too. And while well-trodden ground is traversed once again, there is also less familiar fare. Did you know that Queen Victoria had a book published when she was aged ten? Or that H.G.Wells described Anna Sewell's **Black Beauty** as 'the sympathetic story of a soundly Anglican horse'? Or that the American Rifle Association in 1938 objected to Disney's film **Bambi** on the grounds that it gave hunters a bad image? Or that well over a thousand new books for children continued to be published even when Britain was otherwise up against it in 1943?

The journey taken by children's books over the centuries from early solemn sermonising to the freedom they enjoy today is told not just within the text but also through its splendid illustrations. Crabbed print can be seen giving way to something more playful, and sedate pictures get larger, take on colour and start appearing in less expected places on the page. Books aiming solely at instructing and improving young readers stuck it out gamely for some time, despite Dr Johnson's wise words: 'Remember always that the parents buy the books, and that the children never read them.' But children often managed to find less respectable material, and this current book also gives space to chap books, Penny Dreadfuls and comics.

Politics also get a mention, from Nazi re-writing of fairy tales to Soviet propaganda conveyed in brilliant new picture books that had a direct influence on early Puffin publications. It is common to think that Britain during the last century avoided direct political discussion when writing for children. But that was not always the case as Kimberly Reynolds has pointed out in her recent ground-breaking study **Left Out: the Forgotten Radical Tradition in Children's Publishing in Britain**. The books she discusses do not appear in this present volume, but there are plenty of others that do, from missionary texts to fairy tales and pop-up books. For older readers, there is also the chance to come across particular stories that have since fallen away but still have a special significance for all who once might have enjoyed them so very much.

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