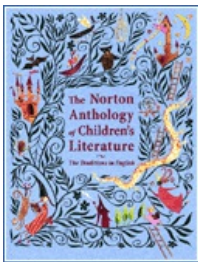


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The Tragic End of Children's Literature — An Obituary and Lament

Tuesday, August 22, 2006



Dorothea Israel Wolfson sees the very end of children's literature — and she sees it in “the new 2,471-page, lap-crushing *Norton Anthology of Children's Literature*.” Her review of the anthology, published in the summer edition of the *Claremont Review of Books*, is priceless.

The anthology reflects the new postmodern ethos in which “the distinction between heroes and villains is often blurred.” No kidding. As a matter of fact, there are very few heroic figures left.

Consider this piece of analysis:

Indeed, it's hard nowadays to tell children's literature from adult literature. As the editors correctly observe, this is partly because the lines between childhood and adulthood have themselves become blurred. Locke thought that the “tender” minds of children should be protected from the corruptions of the adult world—and yet these are now the genre's warp and woof. “Children's literature has also begun to resemble adult literature in subject matter,” write the editors, “using frank and provocative language to depict and discuss social problems such as homelessness, drug addiction, abuse, and terrorism and expanding the notion of family to include nontraditional families led by single parents, stepparents, and gay and lesbian parents.”

Thus the postmodern adult world, in all its vulgar glory, is visited upon our children. The editors enthusiastically endorse Jonathan Miller's 1984 picture book “The Facts of Life,” which includes [censored here . . . let's just say “a lifelike replica of a sexual organ”]. Apparently, alternative families provide especially good material for young readers today. After touting the groundbreaking work “Heather Has Two Mommies,” and chiding Focus on the Family and the Heritage Foundation for seeing it as a threat to “what they call traditional American values,” the editors assure us that “there are today no real taboos in domestic fiction for young adults, and few in books for the youngest readers. Family stories now tackle every painful issue imaginable.”

Indeed, they do. Fairy tales, which have always dealt with dysfunctional families, especially wicked stepmothers, now take on a hard modern edge by tackling perhaps the last taboo, incest. “The Norton Anthology” contains ten versions of “Little Red Riding Hood,” beginning with Charles Perrault's classic and ending with Francesca Lia Block's Wolf (1998). Block, unlike Perrault, isn't satisfied with the sexual undertones and imagery of the original; her heroine is the victim of rape at the hands of her mother's boyfriend (“he held me under the crush of his putrid skanky body”) whom she kills with a shotgun at her grandma's house. The editors tell us that this “story shows how a young girl can take charge of her life, while at the same time exposing the sado-masochistic ties that exist in many dysfunctional families.”

Well, there you have it. You can't even trust Little Red Riding Hood. Dorothea Israel Wolfson offers a cogent historical analysis of how all this came to pass, with the politicization and vulgarization of children's literature coming on the heels of a reaction to the kind of moralistic literature produced for children by the Puritans. She makes specific reference to John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau:

The editors of the anthology acknowledge in passing their debt to Locke and Rousseau—who in a sense created our modern understanding of childhood, permanently influencing all subsequent children's



literature. The editors, however, wish to promote a revolution of their own: a new, more candid, and frankly, more nihilistic corpus. Despite heralding children's literature as "life-enhancing" and "life-changing," the Norton editors aim in fact to dampen children's enchantment with the world, forcing them to acquiesce to the grim realities and multicultural obsessions of contemporary adults.

Spending a bit of time in the children's literature section of your local library or bookstore is likely to leave you believing that those two categories really do mark the new books for children — "grim realities and multi-cultural obsessions." Read them and weep.

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