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AN IMPRESSIVE CRITICAL TRIO

The openhearted audience; ten authors talk about writing for children, ed. Virginia Haviland. Library of Congress, 1980. 198 pp. $9.00 cloth. ISBN 0-8444-0288-5; ***The signal approach to children's books,*** ed. Nancy Chambers. Scarecrow Press, 1980. 352 pp. $15.00 cloth. ISBN 0-8108-1447-1; ***The child and the book: a psychological and literary exploration,*** Nicholas Tucker. Cambridge University Press, 1981. 259 pp. $11.95 paper. ISBN 0-521-27048-0.

Children's literature warrants serious attention, not condescending dismissal. This is the underlying premise of three noteworthy recent studies. No stuffy pedantry or, what is worse, embittered defensiveness characterizes this trio: their subject is important but not solemn.

Both *The openhearted audience* and *The signal approach to children's books* are collections of parts in which authors, publishers, reviewers and educators — all with a long-standing professional interest in the field — examine different books, writers, themes and predilections. The former is a compilation of ten lectures delivered at the Library of Congress between 1966 and 1978, mostly in observance of National Children's Book Week. Although the authors represent a variety of cultural backgrounds (three Americans, three Britons, two Australians, one Canadian and one Dane), they all share an absolute faith in the value and complexity of writing for what the Australian Ivan Southall calls "the largest literate openhearted audience in the history of the world." In these mainly candid, personal essays, the authors talk about the genesis of their own writing, their literary and family influences and deeply held convictions about their young readership. Despite the fact that these addresses have been published previously — in pamphlet form, as parts of journals or even as title essays of other collections — it is a service to have them available within one cover. Moreover, this book offers the perfect entrée for the student of children's literature interested in pursuing the work of any of these authors. What stronger encouragement to explore the richness of the shadow symbol than this catalogue from Ursula Le Guin's "The Child and the Shadow":

> The shadow is the other side of our psyche, the dark brother of the conscious mind. It is Cain, Caliban, Frankenstein's monster, Mr. Hyde. It is Vergil who guided Dante through hell, Gilgamesh's friend Enkidu, Frodo's enemy Gollum... The shadow stands on the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious mind, and we meet it in our dreams,

as sister, brother, friend, beast, monster, enemy, guide.

The memories, impressions, fears and desires, part of the artist's necessary packsack, are treated very ingenuously by John Rowe Townsend when he makes this admission:

> A poor boy, an ignorant youth, disappeared; an educated person began to emerge, though, alas, one whose education had and still has many fearful gaps in it. But, of course, inside myself, down at the deepest roots of being from which creation springs, Sam is not dead. I am still Sam. I shall be Sam until I die. The remembered back streets of Leeds are to me as the blue remembered hills were to the poet A.E. Housman.

By far the most engaging and successful essays are the personal ones, while the least provocative — like, surprisingly enough, the Canadian-born Eleanor Cameron's "Into Something Rich and Strange" — are merely pastiches of quotations and borrowings.

The second collection, *The Signal approach to children's books*, brings together in one volume a sampling of articles from the first thirty issues of *Signal* to celebrate this British magazine's tenth anniversary. The editor insists that the reprinted and occasionally revised articles have been chosen "to demonstrate *Signal's* range"; in fact, the authors included — among them Alan Tucker, Lance Salway, Elaine Moss, Brian Morse, Anthea Bell, Irene Whalley, Eleanor Graham, Peter Hunt and Aidan Chambers — are not only a generous mix of regular and special *Signal* contributors but also proof of the magazine's international reputation as "a lively, challenging and often controversial voice." Because it is such a potpourri, with topics ranging from the Evangelical Hesba Stretton to the poet Ted Hughes, from critical theory to publishing problems and trends, from a history of the Cinderella story to an assessment of "quality and value in three contemporary children's books," it is unwise for a reviewer to do much more than invite the reader to agree or disagree with this host of controversial voices. And if the critics themselves start to sound righteous and overbearing, the reader can always nod appreciatively at the sensible quotes from authors, like Edward Ardizzone, Rumer Godden and Erik Haugaard, which stud the book. As a final treat there is a long interview with Alan Garner.

Both of these collections are addressed to the student, professional or fledgling, of children's literature. By contrast, Nicholas Tucker's *The child and the book* appears to have the widest audience; it actually brings parents into the picture. Tucker's is also the most exciting of the three books, because one hand and set of opinions are in control and because the partnering of psychology and literature often yields some brilliant as well as outlandish insights. Always upholding the literature of childhood as a delicate balance of fantasy and reality, the ideal and the practicable, Tucker sets out to answer the question of why certain themes and approaches appeal to children at specific ages, by examining different narrative forms and styles (first books, story and picture-

books, fairy stories, early fiction, juvenile comics) in terms of the maturing perceptions of their surroundings held by the young viewers and readers. There is no clumsy stereotyping of books and ages, no "arbitrary rules of thumb," but rather a careful appreciation of a body of literature that accommodates itself to childish modes of comprehension, along with an awareness of the child's continuing need to investigate and assimilate variations in his environment into bigger and more complex "mental maps." The influence of Piaget is evident throughout this "psychological and literary exploration"; Tucker has also made judicious use of a selection of remembrances and dicta from Jean-Paul Sartre, Dylan Thomas, W.H. Auden, G.K. Chesterton and Coleridge.

Some of the particular strengths of this study are more surprising than others. Tucker's treatment of fairy stories as explanations of phenomena, survivals of primitive cultures, reflections of vital personal fantasies, and re-enactments and resolutions of the Oedipus complex is predictably rich but, in our day, it explores almost overworked territory. Yet Tucker adds some distinctive fillips by providing a Freudian and Jungian reading of "The Frog Prince" and by observing how Hitler and Bettelheim have valued the Grimms' tales for vastly different reasons. Less predictable too is his extended and cogent defense of Enid Blyton and of comic books.

The few detracting features of Tucker's study have nothing to do with the potential dangers of the psychological scrutiny of literature. There are some unfortunate overstatements, generalities and omissions. Because he believes it is "sadly little read by children today," Tucker does not discuss any poetry apart from nursery rhymes. He also indulges in the usual and unquestioned criticisms of the "sentimentality and insensitive, patronising attitudes" of Victorian children's books. His fence-sitting on the issue of sadistic pulp literature seems a regrettably lost opportunity to take a stand on the critical disagreement over whether it has a legitimate function or is a deplorable inducement to violence.

In the closing chapter, however, Tucker redeems himself eloquently. "Who Reads Children's Books?" is a lucid tribute to the mind's love of the search for what Coleridge called " 'the Great' and 'the Whole'." Like all the diverse voices in the other collections, Tucker credits a large share in the growth of this humane love and search to the formative literature of childhood. For this prime reason all three studies should be on the shelves of those who take children and their reading seriously.

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