

Australia through the looking-glass: children's fiction 1830-1980, Brenda Niall. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1984. 358 pp. \$26.50 cloth.

The content and form of the stories told to children within Australian Aboriginal communities are still subject to scholarly dispute. The evidence in some instances has been subverted because of the vulgarization of adult Aboriginal stories into a form suitable for white children. By contrast, white Australian children's stories are very well documented. Since 1841, with the publication of *A mother's offering to her children* by "A Lady Long Resident in NSW", Australia has had a rich tradition of writing for children and, more recently, an equally distinguished set of scholarly works about it. H.M. Saxby's two-volume *A history of Australian children's literature* (1969, 1971) covers the ground thoroughly up to 1970; Marcie Muir's *A bibliography of Australian children's books* (1970, 1976), also in two volumes, includes both books written by Australian authors and books set in Australia; and another work by Muir, *A history of Australian children's book illustration* (1982), covers pictorial books for children.

Brenda Niall's *Australia through the looking-glass* is a study of some 275 children's books, chosen for their chronological coverage of the period from 1830 to the present, their aesthetic and historical originality, and, in some cases, their social documentation. Niall begins with a consideration of *Alfred Dudley or the Australian settlers* (1830). It is a novel about a young hero who makes his fortune in Australia by an author whose knowledge of white Australian settlement is only of the most general and second-hand kind. Its purpose is to encourage the transmission of English village life to the colony.

Most of the Australian children's fiction of the nineteenth century — and Niall is exclusively concerned with fiction and documentary disguised as fiction — found its main readership in England. Most books were published in England; most concerned the pioneering struggle of young adults. In the 1890s, however, the focus shifted to younger heroes: children with a rebellious or mischievous streak who regarded themselves as Australians, not as transplanted English children. Ethel Turner, writing in a mode of domestic realism, had substantial success with her first book, *Seven little Australians* (1894). English reviewers made almost inevitable comparisons to the work of Louisa Alcott, one of them superciliously asserting that the book provided evidence that "antipodean boys and girls are brought up rather too much on the lines of American children to leave much room for grace, modesty and reverence in their composition". Yet Turner's point of view is more child-based than Alcott's; her children are more self-reliant

and independent of a sense of adult values than Alcott's.

Turner's novels were set in the city of Sydney — a choice marking another distinction from the pioneering settings of much earlier children's fiction. Mary Grant Bruce, while similar to Turner in using a mode of domestic realism, moved the setting of her "Billabong" series (notably *A little bush maid*, 1910) to a remote cattle-station. Where Lucy Maud Montgomery placed the opening time of *Anne of Green Gables* in a distinctly earlier period, enabling her to bring the time of the sequels up to the time of writing, Mary Grant Bruce began in a near-contemporary time and in her sequels moved much more slowly than contemporary events.

Brenda Niall's account of Australian versions of *Tom Sawyer*, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, or *What Katy did at school* does not suggest much of abiding interest. Nor have there been, until recently, many distinguished Australian historical novels for children. Fairy and fantasy tales have, however, flourished. Ida Rentoul Outhwaite and Annie Rentoul produced a number of fairy books, very much in the English tradition. Ethel Pedley's *Dot and the kangaroo* (1899) is an animal fantasy of a somewhat plodding, moralistic, kind. But May Gibbs, with her *Snugglypot and cuddlepie* (1918) and its sequels, managed to combine the fairy tale and the nature fantasy in a lively and original way. Her gum-nut babies live in a natural world inhabited by evil banksia men and snakes, animals such as lizards, koalas, and kangaroos who may be protective and kindly or self-important and irascible, and small blossom creatures who are fearful and in constant danger. Norman Lindsay's *The magic pudding* (1918), an animal fantasy, has a more swaggering style and more winks and nudges to the reader, appropriate for an older audience.

The first two or three decades of the twentieth century and the period from the 1950s to the present day have been the most fruitful for the Australian children's story. In between have been many derivative tales and a few classics such as Davison's *Man-Shy* (1913), a non-anthropomorphic animal story.

Stories in the 1960s of children trying to survive without adult help in menacing bush conditions contain much more fearfulness, helplessness, and hopelessness than their nineteenth-century counterparts. Ivan Southall, in *Hills end* (1962), *Ash road* (1965), and later novels, takes the novel for adolescents to the edges of despair and anarchy in a prose style that often makes use of stream of consciousness. Southall's *Bread and honey* (1970) and *Josh* (1971) deal with the alienated anguish of teen-agers unable to make sense of themselves or the world they inhabit.

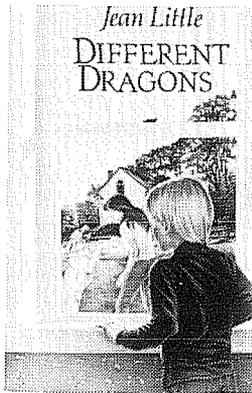
The historical novel for children had many practitioners in the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps the most imaginative works are those by Patricia Wrightson, whose works seek to explore the meaning of Aboriginal beliefs. In *The Nargun and the stars* (1973) she writes about a powerful spirit of the

continent which is "discovered" by a white city boy. Wrightson's subsequent Wirrun trilogy is centred on a young Aboriginal man: white civilization is entirely marginal in these mythic stories of Wirrun rediscovering the meaning and needs of the land.

Brenda Niall's account of Australian children's fiction shows awareness of nineteenth- and twentieth-century children's fiction in English elsewhere in the world. Within this context Niall offers significant insights into what is distinctive (and what is derivative) in the Australian tradition. Her emphasis is on the plot, social attitudes, and language of the stories. Over fifty black-and-white illustrations from the works discussed enhance the value of the book, as does a select bibliography of primary and secondary sources. If Naill's interest is mainly on the novel for adolescents rather than on the tale for younger children, that indicates not a weakness in this book but the need for another as well.

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