

# Mirrors of Imagination

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*Children's Books of Yesterday*, Philip James. The Studio Ltd. (London and New York), 1933; reprinted by Gale Research Company (Detroit), 1976. 128 pp. \$12.50

*Early Children's Books and Their Illustration*. The Pierpont Morgan Library (Oxford Press, Toronto), 1975. 263 pp. \$29.95.

*Graphis Children's Book Illustration (3)*. Walter Herdeg, The Graphis Press (Hurtig, Edmonton), 1975. 136 pp. \$20.00.

The most obvious common denominator of these volumes is the delight that they must afford to any reader. As a mirror to some of the most gifted artists and imaginations of the last two hundred years and more, they reflect a myriad of fanciful two and four-legged beasts, worlds long gone and to come, fantasies impregnated with the exuberance that stems from creativity allowed to run its course unfettered by the demands of realism, logic, or "adult" consciousness.

Though all the volumes are picture books dealing with the illustration of children's literature, they are quite different in aim and accomplishment. Ultimately, however, they all succeed because of the strength of their visual content.

*Children's Books of Yesterday* is a reprint of the 1933 publication based on the Exhibition of Illustrated Books for Children at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1932. It is a mainly pictorial survey of Anglo-American children's books of the last two hundred or so years, and illustrations in it range from a page of the *Visible World (1672)* by Comenius (erroneously considered by many to be the first children's book) to the more modern *The Golliwog's Airship, 1902*. Sandwiched between these two examples, in roughly chronological order, are hundreds of engravings and pictures taken from books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

While the merits of such an undertaking are obvious in that numerous little-known works and drawings are represented, there are some draw-backs. First, the wealth of pictures is not balanced by sufficient text. Thus, the introduction is sparse, if ambitious, and captions for illustrations lack uniformity, ranging from the name of the artist alone to several lines dealing with the volume under discussion. Occasionally the information provided is valuable; sometimes it merely voices the author's personal opinion of a text. Such disparity makes the book useless as a scholarly tool unless the reader is knowledgeable in the subject; however, the enthusiasm of the casual adult browser or of any child will not be in the least dampened by this as he is provided with enough in-

formation to explain general trends in children's literature and, more importantly, illustrations which offer as much to delight the imagination today as they did years ago.

*Early Children's Books and Their Illustration* is a catalogue of selections from the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library. Its aim, as stated in the preface, is "to show us, by word and by picture, how and where children's literature originated and which kinds of stories were chosen for children -- and by children -- over the centuries." The volume succeeds admirably. As regards text, it not only provides general information in the form of a succinct preface and an essay by Cambridge's J. H. Plumb on "The First Flourishing of Children's Books", but also offers a fair amount of bibliographical detail on individual volumes. Illustrations are sharp and beautifully reproduced, with many in colour.

The book is arranged by genre and includes a broad variety of past and present children's literature: fables, nursery rhymes, proverbs, emblem books, fairy and moral tales, Bibles, almanacs, hornbooks, broadside ballads, street cries, as well as the work of individual authors: *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe* to name only two. Since some of these were adopted by children for their own, sections begin with a brief introduction to the genre, then indicate the earliest copy in the possession of the Library and proceed through more recent versions especially directed at children. For example, the chapter on *Aesop's Fables* begins with the Amherst Greek Papyrus 26 (third or fourth century) and lists Greek, Latin, French, Italian and English editions in the collection, terminating its survey with an English edition of 1912, wonderfully illustrated by Arthur Rackham. Such a format fulfils the aim of the volume to show the development of children's books; it also indicates what a child would have read in years gone by when the art of literacy rather than age afforded membership in the educated classes.

The illustrations are, of course, the selling point of the volume. The quality of reproduction reflects equally the intricacies of Toppell's magnificent hydra (*The History of Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents, 1658*), and the satiric skills of Thackeray in the ingeniously drawn characters of *The Rose and the Ring* manuscript as well as the charming simplicity of Gelett Burgess' "Goops". Although the volume is one more likely to appeal to students of children's literature on basis of title, perusal of its contents would win it instant admiration from anyone.

The *Graphis Children's Book Illustration (3)* is an expanded tri-lingual (English, French and German) edition of the special July, 1975 issue of *Graphis*, a magazine devoted to the illustration of children's books around the world. Its aim is artistic rather than historical or bibliographical; it is a specialized survey and celebration of the illustration in children's books.

The volume is comprised of a collection of essays dealing mainly with contemporary work although three of the papers, "German Picture-Books of the Nineteenth Century", "Tradition and Internationalism in the Swiss Children's Book", and "The Japanese Picture Book in Past and Present" discuss older works. The essays comment upon the stylistic features of established artists and indicate new trends; they also provide some indication of the content of various works considered, especially those in which "relevant" stories deal with the

problems of modern children: divorce, alienation, and conflict among siblings for example. While the essays provide some information not easily obtainable elsewhere, they tend to be inadequate, at least for the serious student of children's literature. Most appear to be written by publishers or the publicists of printing firms: all leave an impression of lack of depth.

The illustrations, however, more than compensate for this lack. They present an abundance of imaginative interpretations of the best-known scenes in children's classics; they mirror the traditional ethnic motifs of various nationalities as well as the highlights of modern children's books. It is impossible to describe adequately the energy of the visual aspect of *Children's Book Illustration* because the pictures have all been included on the criterion of excellence and they fulfil it. From the surrealist sophistication of Roland Torpor's work in the Italian *Le Avventure di Pinocchio* to the gentle traditionalism of Miyoshi Akasaka's drawing, or the sly humour of Heinz Edelmann's crocodile wedding in *Kathrinchen ging Spazieren*, the book both delights and captivates; obviously, a special advantage to this publication is its presentation of children's books from countries other than the English-speaking nations: European, Slavic and Eastern.

Technically, *Early Children's Books and Their Illustration* and the *Graphis Children's Book Illustration (3)* are far superior to *Children's Books of Yesterday*: their reproductions are sharper, larger and more carefully laid out. The first and third volumes reviewed also have weaknesses in text as far as the student is concerned; only *Early Children's Books and Their Illustration* balances scholarship and general interest with excellent illustration. All the volumes, however, provide a mirror of the changing imaginary worlds envisioned for children, from the stern engravings of the eighteenth century, pictures which attempted to teach and terrify, to the joyful work of the best nineteenth and twentieth century artists who celebrate their approval of the child's imagination in fantastic creations.

Of course, the above is broad generalization. Every illustration must be examined for its own sake, whether by a social historian charting changes in attitude towards children or a child discovering or re-discovering the favourite scenes of child lore.

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