

Gymnasts of Virtue: Raising the Best Possible Children

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Throughout history, writers who choose to write for children almost always try to inspire, educate and generally improve their readers: in other words, they create images of childhood in *books* in order to raise the best possible children in the *real world*. How they do this, though, depends on what they understand children *are* like, and what they believe children *can* and *should* be like.

There are some striking differences between how we understand children and childhood today and how they were viewed in the past. Let me give you an example. In 1879 a father began to keep a journal in which, among other things, he recorded how he and his wife were raising their infant son, Richard. Here is part of an entry written when Richard was eighteen months old.

Our anxiety for his future makes us careful in ridding him of bad habits and making him 'supple' as Locke – whom we are now reading – would say. The other night he cried after being put to bed, not of course from pain, but mere contrariness. I tried to induce him to be quiet and failed. I then took him out of bed and whipped him, and as he cried out even more, pressed him close to me, and held his head and bade him to be quiet. In a moment, after a convulsive sob or two, he became quite quiet. I put him back in his cot, told him to be quiet and to go to sleep, and left him. Not a sound more did he make, and he went to sleep. The next day at noon he cried again when put to bed. I went to him and told him he must not cry, that he must lie down ... be quiet and go to sleep.... He became and remained perfectly quiet, and went to sleep. He now goes to bed at noon and night and to sleep without a cry. If this can be done, how much more may not be done? What a responsibility! What a superb instrument, gymnast of virtue and beautiful conduct, may not a man be made early in life.



To modern eyes, whipping an infant in this way seems monstrous, yet the passage was written by a sensitive, cultivated man named Thomas Cobden-Sanderson (1840 - 1922). He was liberal, progressive, an early supporter of women - and he loved and wanted the best for his baby son.

The journal shows that this father believed he was doing the best both for his son and for society. This particular entry

Thomas Cobden-Sanderson (1879-1922)
Raising 'gymnasts of virtue'...

tells us that he and the baby's mother were reading John Locke, whose *Essay Concerning Human Education* (1689) had been one of the most influential works on child development for nearly 200 years. They were consulting an expert on child-rearing in the hope of parenting well and so producing the best possible son; one who would become a 'gymnast of virtue' and a person of value to society.

For me, as I suspect for all of us, the way that this father disciplined his infant son is disturbing. But this is where we can see a key interface between early children's literature and actual lived childhoods. From the seventeenth century onwards, children's literature was regularly used to show children how they were expected to behave, thus helping to spare the rod without spoiling the child. If children could learn from the mistakes of characters in books, perhaps they could be prevented from making similar mistakes themselves. Books, then, were helping to raise the best possible children.

While evidently Thomas Cobden-Sanderson felt he could not wait for his son to be old enough for literary lessons and examples, there were a great many books he could have turned to when Richard was a little older. Let's look at some typical examples.

Most of the earliest books for children focus on rescuing children from hell – by scaring them into good behaviour. In Britain, one of the first books for children was James Janeway's *A Token for Children: Being An Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of several Young Children* (1671–72). This is a collection of what Janeway claimed were eyewitness accounts he collected while sitting by the bedsides of children who died 'good' deaths - by which he meant that they and those who witnessed their deaths believed they had been accepted into heaven.



A token for children
Originally published in 1671-2.
Punish characters, not children

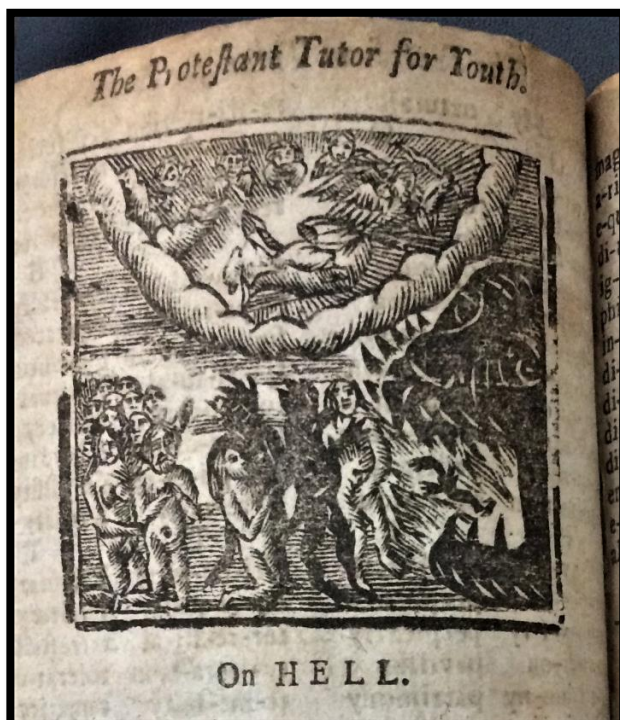
The evidence for this would be such things as a gentle, pain-free death, persistent praying, the ability to prophesy, and joyful visions of Christ and people they loved who had died before them welcoming them to Heaven at the moment of death. So, for instance, just before eight-year-old Sarah Howley died, Janeway records that she cried out with a ‘Cheerful Countenance’:

O so sweet! O so glorious is Jesus! I have the sweet and glorious Jesus; he is sweet, he is sweet, he is sweet! O the admirable love of God in sending Christ! O free Grace to a poor lost Creature.



A Token for Children
Exemplary child death.
Eight-year-old Sara Howley.

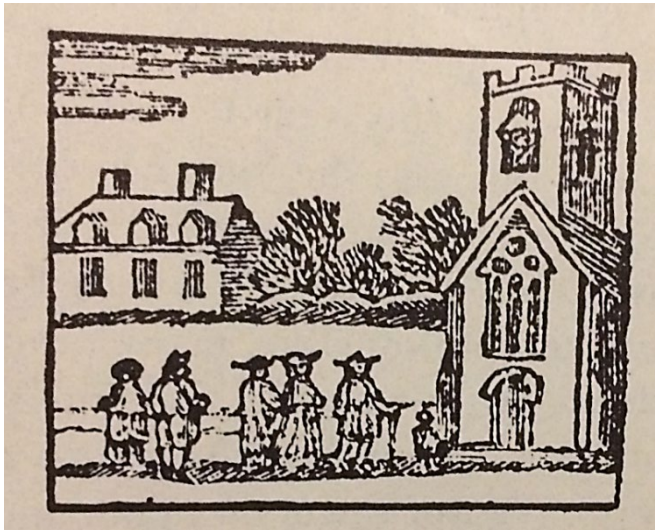
The book urges children never to forget that they will die and that if they are good, they will enjoy the sweetness of Jesus. If they are not good, however, and displease God and their parents, they will face the torments of hell.



When Janeway was writing, these torments would have been very easy for children to imagine. They would have heard about them in church and read about them in books including Joseph Alleine's *A Sure Guide to Heaven* (1672?) which describes fiends cracking the bones, frying the flesh, and ripping open the bodies of sinners and filling them with molten metal. There were terrifying pictures, too: *The Protestant Tutor* (1679) includes an image of devils throwing sinners into the mouth of a fire-breathing demon.

The Protestant Tutor for Youth, 1679

These early children's books assume that every person is born in sin and so good parents need to instruct and discipline their children in order to save their souls. Not long after this, however, ideas about children and how to raise them began to change to reflect the more scientific thinking of the Enlightenment. Parents and teachers began to steer children away from religious works and the superstitions associated with folk tales and legends towards more 'rational' forms of writing.



'Fools all their days' - Goody Two-shoes is mistaken for a ghost

For instance, John Newbery's *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765) includes an episode when the people of a village are terrified by what they think is a ghost. In fact, it is the character known as Goody Two-Shoes who readers have followed since she and her brother were orphaned as children. Goody Two-Shoes supports them by teaching other children to read and write and she becomes quite successful. Towards the end of the book she falls asleep in the village church and is accidentally locked inside. As she tries to escape she makes a great deal of

noise, which causes the villagers to believe that there is a ghost in the church. This is a chance for the narrator to warn young readers not to let their heads be 'stuffed with stories of Ghosts, Fairies, Witches, and such Nonsense' because this will make them 'Fools all their Days.'

The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes, 1765.
Having been raised well, Margery lives a good and successful life ending in wealth and wisdom.

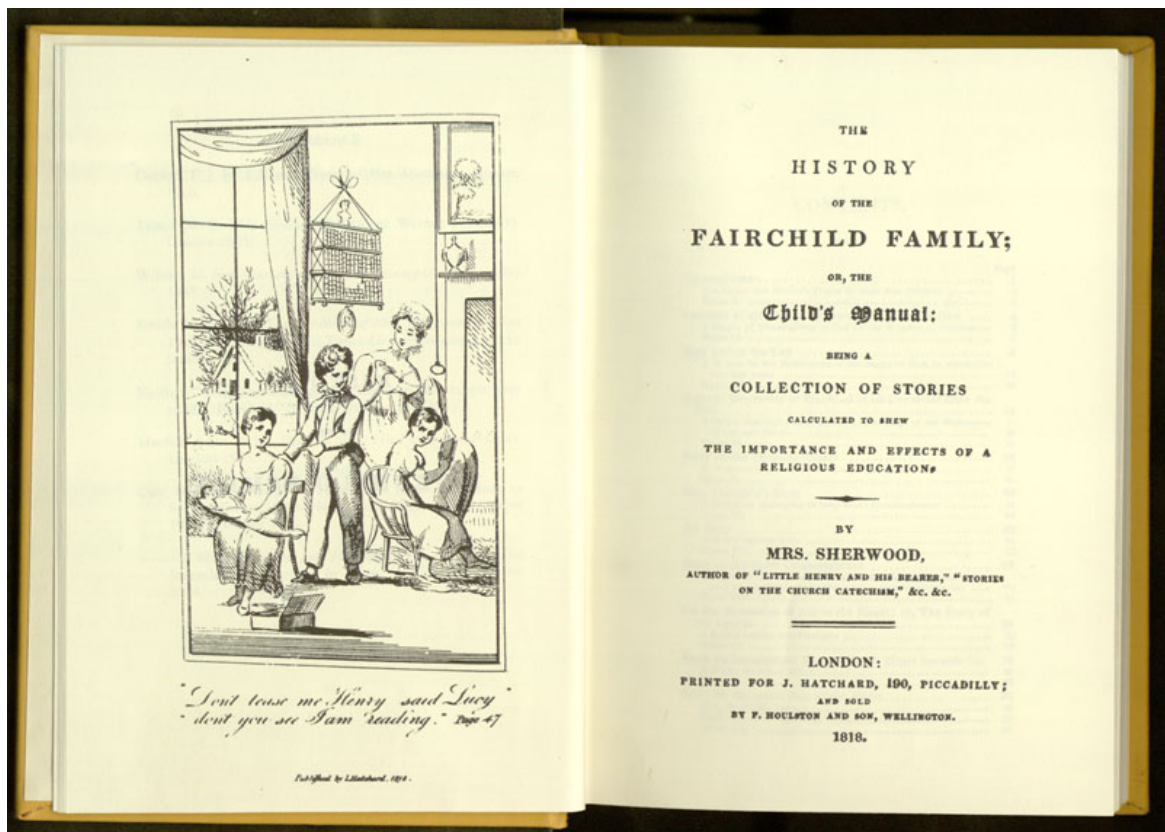


This is precisely what happens in 'The History of Francis Fearful' (Anon. c. 1775). After hearing stories from his nurse including, 'the old woman of Ratcliff-highway, the tales of the fairies ... and stories about Witches and Ghosts, Hobgoblins, and the shrieking woman' Francis becomes incapacitated by his fear of all manner of things (57). As a consequence he is a laughing stock at school - very far from the best possible child a parent hoped to raise.



Francis Fearful,
c. 1775

But rationalism was just one strand of writing for children; it *co-existed* with popular tales and religious works well into the nineteenth century. Closer to his own time, then, Cobden-Sanderson might have encouraged his son to read the hugely popular *History of the Fairchild Family* (1818) by Mary Martha Sherwood. Sherwood's book combines several forms of writing, all related to her view of what children needed and would respond to.



Like the religious context that produced *A Token for Children*, the Fairchild parents believe their children to have been born sinful and so try to save their souls by any means possible. The book includes many punishments for children designed to teach readers the importance of behaving well. In one story, for instance, the young daughter of wealthy parents burns to death when, despite being told not to, she sneakily uses a lighted candle to look at herself in the mirror. [So she is both disobeying her parents and giving in to the sin of vanity.] In another instance, the Fairchild siblings wake up cross one morning and quarrel fiercely over a doll. Their father hears them and all three children are whipped, deprived of food for the whole day, and then given a deliberately shocking illustration of what happens to brothers and sisters who hate each other.

Sherwood uses story-telling techniques based on popular ghost stories to drive home the lesson. At the end of their quarrelsome day, the Fairchild children are taken by their father deep into a dark forest to see the body of a man hanging on a gibbet. The corpse is fully dressed, though it has hung there for years, and its face is so awful that after one glance the children can't bear to look at it. Their father tells them how the man came to this wretched end: it was because he had hated his brother from boyhood. As he is speaking, 'the wind blew strong and shook the gibbet'. The eerie effect makes sure the Fairchild children - and readers - remember that punishment in childhood is far preferable to the eternal damnation suffered by the hanged man.

Stories for children were also used to teach about the consequences of wrong-doing in the here and now. So, for example, Christina Rossetti's poem *Goblin Market* (1862) tells what happens when two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, are approached by goblin fruit-sellers. The goblins urge the girls to buy some of their beautiful fruit: melons, raspberries, pine-apples, blackberries and others more strange and beguiling. Lizzie knows



Goblin Market, Christina Rossetti (1862)

'Their offers should not charm us/Their evil gifts would harm us'. But Laura cannot resist. She pays for the fruit with one of her golden curls, and then begins to feast, but no matter how much of the fruit she eats, her appetite cannot be satisfied.

When Laura finally comes home, she is obsessed with how to get more goblin fruit - but the goblins hide from her, and she begins to waste away. Laura becomes gravely ill and to save her, her sister tracks down the goblins to get her more fruit. But the goblins become angry when she does not eat the fruit herself. Lizzie withstands their pinching, scratching, pushing, hair-pulling and kicks. Finally the fiends try to *force* her to eat by pressing their fruits against her face, but Lizzie is steadfast. When they have done, she rushes back to Laura, who is restored by kissing the juice off her sister's face.



Goblin Market carries various warnings for growing children. From regular attendance at Sunday school and their reading of reward and prize books produced by religious publishing houses, Rossetti's juvenile audience would have been accustomed to decoding allegories, emblems and parables. Most obvious is the warning about the consequences of greed, desire, and temptation, here couched in terms of food. For hungry growing children raised on dull Victorian nursery fare, the goblins' wonderful fruits must have been especially enticing. But the price of indulgence is shown as too great since few will find anyone as loyal as Lizzie to save them.

For girls the poem also contains a very powerful warning about strange men (all the goblins are male) who may damage them. At a time when it was not possible to write directly about sexual activity, *Goblin Market* serves as an effective warning about predatory men and the dangers of seduction. At the same time, it also contains a positive female role model in Lizzie, who masters her fear and resists temptation to save her sister. With its lessons in the value of self-control, the importance of heeding the warnings of adults, and the dangers of

advances from strange men, *Goblin Market* has much to say to children about the kind of people they should aspire to become.

Nineteenth-century children's books are filled with positive and negative examples for children. Possibly the most disturbing negative example of all is found in Lucy Lane Clifford's *The New Mother* (1882). This begins as a story of an idyllic home: a loving mother has two well-behaved and loving daughters and a baby until one day, while out on an errand, the sisters meet an odd-looking girl in the woods. The girl shows them a strange instrument and claims that a tiny man and woman live inside it and dance when she plays it. The girls long to see the little couple, but she says they may not because they are good and she only shows them to naughty children.



The New Mother, Lucy Lane Clifford (1882)

The girls are desperate to see the little man and woman so they decide to be naughty. Their bad behaviour worries their mother of course, and she tells them that if they don't start being good again she will have to leave them to the care of a new mother 'with glass eyes and wooden tail'. Even this dreadful threat can't overcome the corrupting attraction of the little people. The girls become naughtier and naughtier and finally their mother leaves, telling them the new mother will be there soon. After an agonising wait, they hear 'a sound as of something heavy being dragged along the ground outside, and then there was a loud and terrible knocking at the door' (Clifford, 'New', p. 138). Knowing the dreadful new mother has arrived, they flee into the woods, and evidently die since the story ends with them as ghost-children, always seeking the dear mother they drove away.

In *The New Mother*, the children are easily taken in by the wicked stranger because they have little knowledge of the world. Their innocence makes them vulnerable. But in many

nineteenth-century stories, childhood innocence is a protective shield and a strength. This is particularly true in the vast numbers of books produced by religious publishing houses because in the nineteenth century there was a sea-change in thinking about the condition of childhood. Instead of believing that children are born sinful and need to be saved, the evangelical churches taught that children are born good and are capable of saving others who have been corrupted by the world.

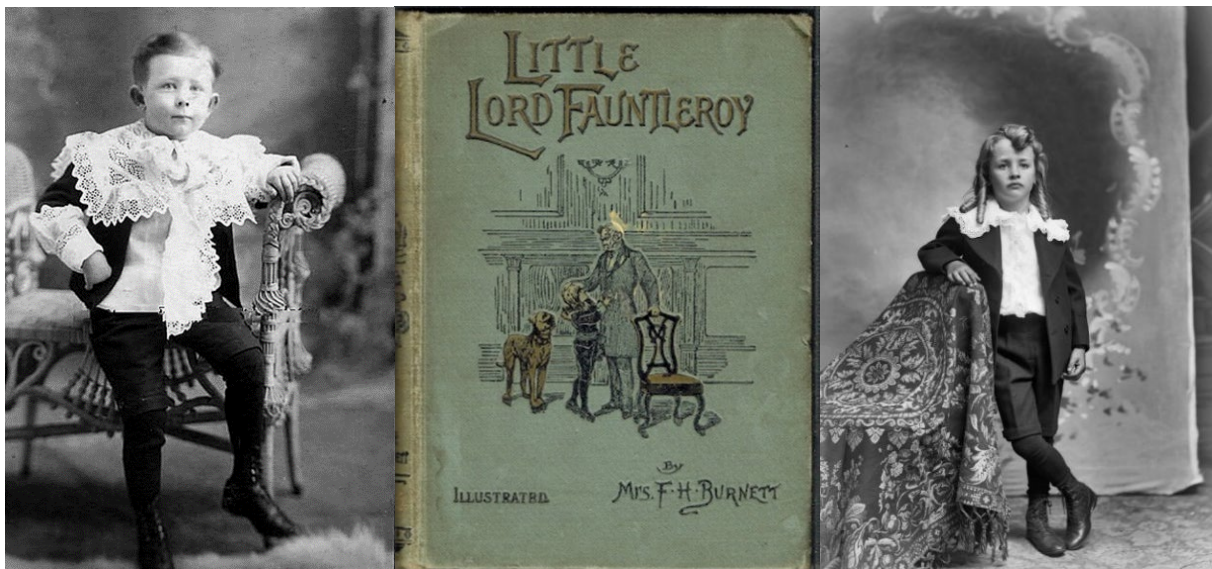


First published 1866

Importantly, childhood innocence was not associated with a particular class of child, so the poorest children in the nation who lived in squalid conditions and even among prostitutes and drunkards are shown as more effective at helping the lost and damaged adults around them than clerics, social workers or politicians. For instance, in *Jessica's First Prayer* (1866) by the best-selling evangelical writer Hesba Stretton, Jessica's mother is an actress (which implies that she is a fallen woman) who doesn't provide adequate food or clothing for Jessica. But Jessica gradually makes friends with a miser who is high up in the local church and under her influence he becomes a better man and finally adopts her. In one way or another she improves a great many other people's lives, too. When she is invited into the

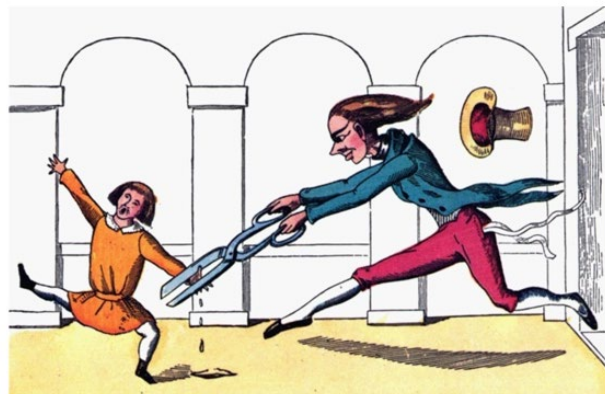
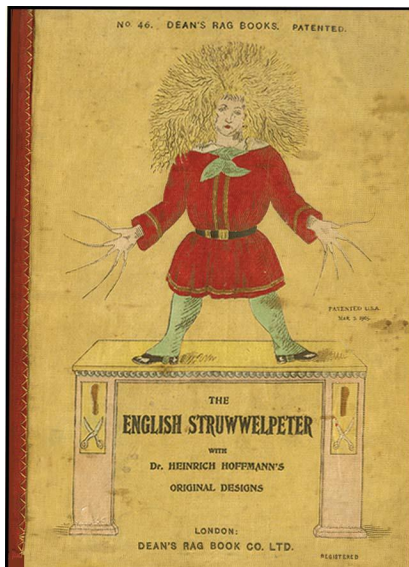
church one day, she instinctively offers a prayer, proving that though she has never been taught about God or religion she has grace and faith.

This kind of celebration of childhood innocence did not begin with the church, however. Romantic poets such as William Blake and William Wordsworth helped create an image of childhood as an ideal state, close to nature, close to God and capable of transforming the world by seeing it with fresh eyes. In his *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* (18??) Wordsworth proposed that we come into this world 'trailing clouds of glory' and this gives childhood a redemptive potential.



This idealised version of childhood was tremendously influential throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, even in books that had no overtly religious content. So, for instance, in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885), a young boy, raised in the poorest part of an American city, is made the heir of his rich English grandfather. His unspoiled innocence transforms his grandfather and the dreary and class-bound manor-house where he lives. By extension, it also redeems an antiquated and decaying British social system.

By the time Thomas Cobden-Sanderson's son Richard was six years old, he could have read all of these books. In fact, there were so many books *about* different kinds of children, whether they were naughty and punished or innocent saviours, that an entirely new way of writing for children developed. In books such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Struwwelpeter* (1845), by the German Heinrich Hoffman, writers and illustrators played with the conventions of children's literature and offered some extreme - even absurd - examples of the kind of trouble children could get into.



Published in German in 1845. English translation 1848

Hoffman's hugely popular book of cautionary tales with comic illustrations was quickly translated into English and became a long-lived feature on the nursery bookshelf. Among other characters who come to sticky ends are Conrad, who sucks his thumbs and so, as his parents have warned him will happen, his thumbs are eventually cut off by 'the great, long, red-legged scissor-man'. Then there is Harriet, who plays with matches and

So she was burnt, with all her clothes,
And arms, and hands, and eyes, and nose;
Till she had nothing else to lose
Except her little scarlet shoes;
And nothing else but these was found,
Among her ashes on the ground.



Hoffman's verse treats childhood death very lightly - and very differently from the Puritan warnings of what happened to naughty children with which we began. In the case of *Struwwelpeter*, this lightness is part of the comic effect. But by appealing to a somewhat dark and grotesque side of children, Hoffman, who was an early psychologist, is also acknowledging that real children are not purely one thing or another. Certainly not purely good and innocent in the manner of some of the characters they read about. His book helped to change the image of childhood yet again, now taking into account that real childhood is a complex and emotionally vulnerable stage.

This understanding percolates through one of the strangest children's books of the early twentieth century: J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1904). It talks of the Neverlands in children's minds and early on includes a description of the disturbing way mothers intrude into children's thoughts when they are asleep. Barrie compares this to the way mothers sort children's clothes into drawers, placing the nice thoughts on top and hiding the unpleasant ones away. It is a simple image but one that takes readers into the world of the psyche and holds up a mirror to children so that they can see themselves not as adults would *like them to be* but as individuals with internal worlds.

Although it is usually misremembered as a delightful story about Peter and his gang of Lost Boys who teach the Darling children to fly and take them to the Neverland, Barrie's book is

in fact full of spiteful behaviour, bullying, and evidence of the damage children can inflict on each other. The Lost Boys shoot down Wendy because Tinkerbell is jealous of her. Captain Hook has never recovered from his failure to be a success at Eton.

There are also a great many references to death - but none to God or an afterlife. Peter himself is a kind of Death-figure. When he first appears in one of Barrie's adult novels, *The Little White Bird* (1902), he finds and buries the babies who have fallen out of their prams in the park when their nurses are not watching. Implicitly then, all the children in the Neverland have died in the real world. This idea is confirmed because once they are there they, like Peter, never grow up. The only children who never grow-up are those who die in childhood.

Paradoxically, death is ever-present in the Neverland, too. The children are for ever pursued by Indians; Tiger Lily is tied to a rock to be drowned, and Captain Hook is pursued by that great *memento mori*, the ticking crocodile. Indeed, Peter's most famous line is, "To die would be an awfully big adventure!". The line was omitted during First World War, when audiences for the original play version of *Peter Pan* contained both families who had lost men in battle and soldiers on leave.



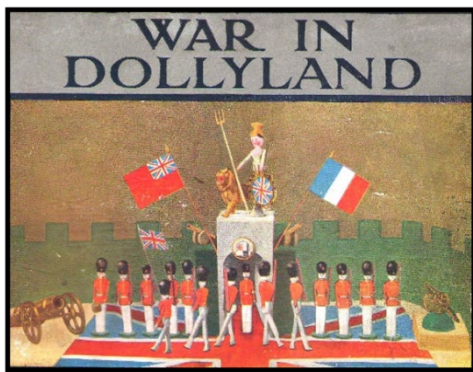
"To die will be an awfully big adventure" - Paulo Rego 'Neverland'

Where earlier works saw raising children as requiring adults to instruct and improve them, from the early twentieth century writing like Barrie's, which attempts to address children's imaginations and emotional needs, became more common. At the same time, another change in thinking about children and young people was coming into being, perhaps in response to the First World War when a great many boys in particular (but some girls too) went straight

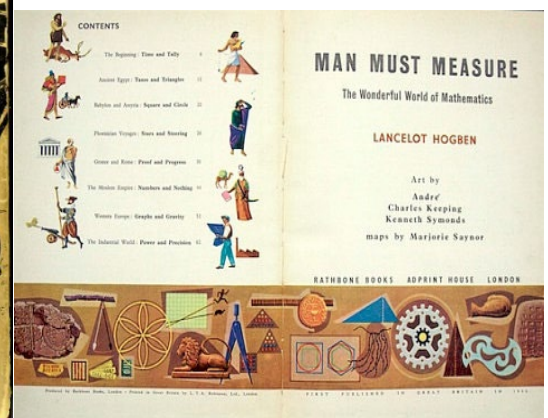
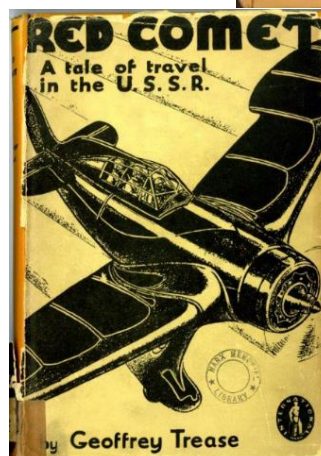
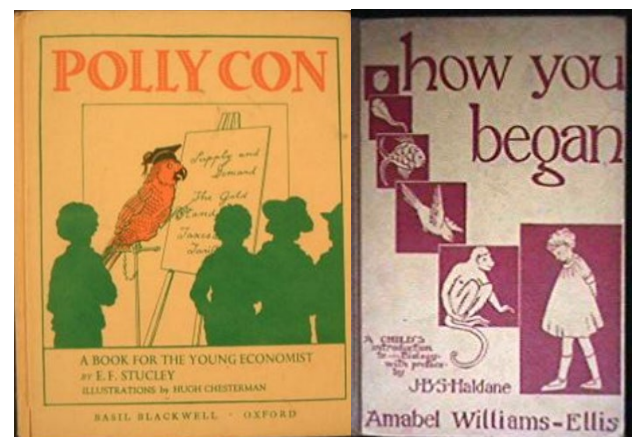
from the classroom to the battlefield. When that war was over, there was a strong sense that children should not have to endure such things again and children's literature began to include books that encouraged readers themselves to make changes to the world so that there would be no more wars.

To this end children's books for all ages challenged many long-standing ideas, starting with

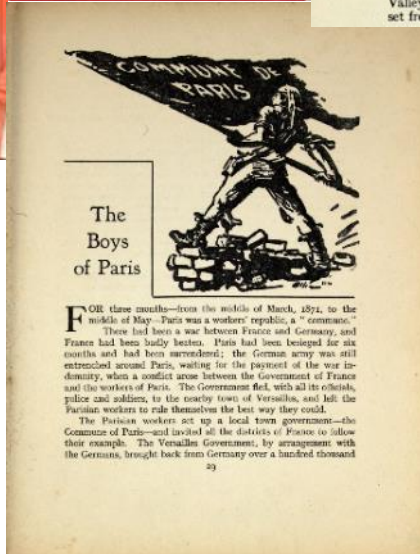
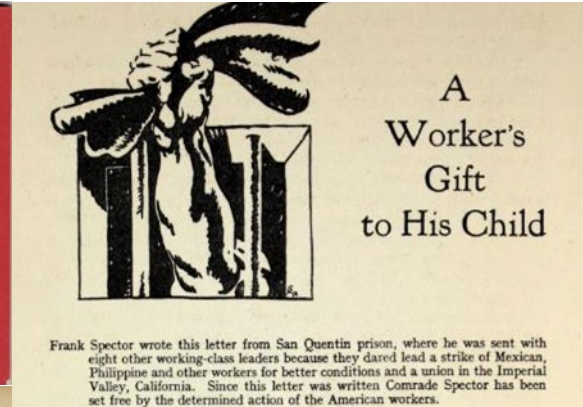
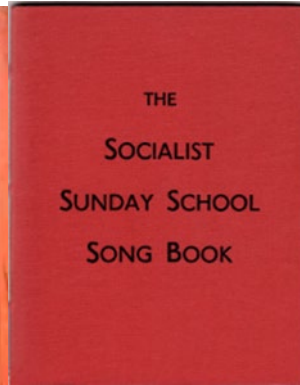
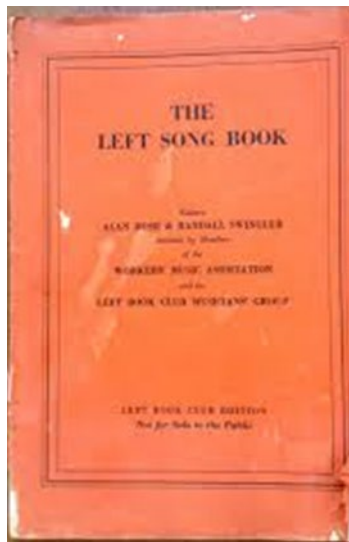
- Belief in the necessity and benefits of military strength. [critiques the motives of those who wage war; the intelligence of military leaders; points out that ordinary people suffer]
- They campaigned for greater access to healthy lives and good education - including sex education - for all children.
- They encouraged children to read about the new sciences - from economics to sex education - and the huge social experiment that was taking place in Soviet Russia.
- Perhaps most importantly, they looked beyond national interests and promoted the virtues of thinking in terms of a global society meaning equal respect and opportunities for all people, sharing resources and being environmentally responsible.



Challenging militarism

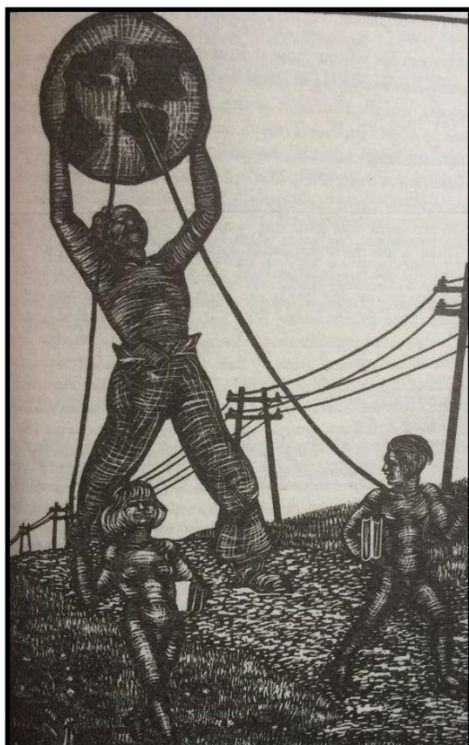


New sciences to improve life for the many



Radical children's literature and global aspirations

*I've got a sister in Melbourne, a brother in Pairee,
The whole wide world is dad and mother to me.
Wherever you turn you will find my kin,
Whatever the creed or the colour of skin.*



'Boys and girls bring in the future'
From *An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents* (1932)

For me, these books show that raising the best possible children had come to mean showing them how to become physically and mentally healthy, well educated, and civically minded. As this image from a juvenile reference book of the time shows, it was hoped these children would then usher in a new world, free from the booms, busts, diseases and inequities of the past.

That ways of thinking about and representing childhood could change so thoroughly over time shows that images and ideas about childhood are different from the actual lived experience of real children. Even when texts appear realistic, they will be underpinned by certain cultural understandings of childhood. What you may have noticed in the examples I have shown is that with few exceptions, the children in children's books are white, stereotypically gendered, and they represent the values of the educated and comfortably off parts of society. When children of the poor feature, it is usually for social, religious or political reasons.

Of course thinking about childhood continued to change through to the end of the last century [and it is changing as we speak], but since it was moving steadily towards the children's literature we know today, I will leave you to reflect on your experience of how things have changed and what contemporary children's books tell us about how we now think the best possible children should be raised.