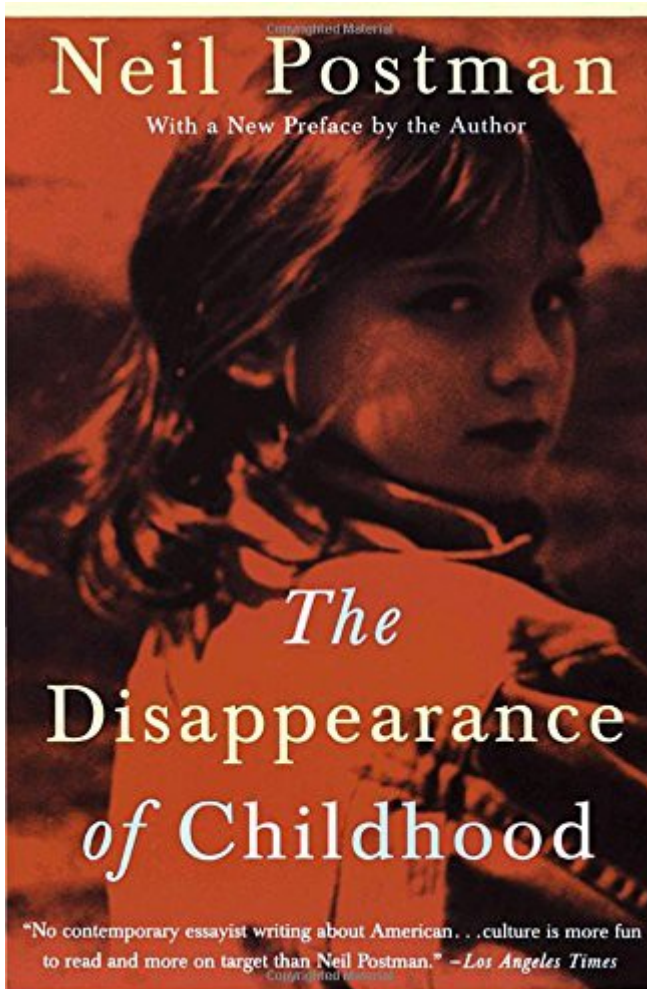


# The Disappearance of Childhood & Children's Literature as Nostalgia



## **1. The Creation of Childhood & Children's Literature**

To even entertain the possibility of the disappearance of children's literature, we have to first take notice of the fact that there was a time when childhood, as we know it, did not exist. In his now familiar observation, Philippe Aries has argued that the concept of "childhood" was unknown before the Renaissance. Until then, children (after they attained the "age of reason") were regarded as small adults who mingled, competed, and worked with mature adults.[i]

Many people find it difficult to imagine a time when “children” did not exist because our own acceptance of the cultural construct of “childhood” has been so pervasive that it is now confused with biological fact. Our imaginations are taxed when we try to imagine a culture where children are not distinguished from adults. For us, it seems to mean imagining incongruities – say, legions of ten year-olds in business suits, swinging their briefcases downtown and talking on cell phones; or children mingling with grown-ups, say, in Las Vegas, their drinks in hand, on their way to risqué shows.

As Marie Winn has noted, it is easier to imagine a time when childhood didn’t exist if we remember that in pre-industrial times the world of labor meant agriculture and arts and crafts, conducted at home and with the help of child labor.[ii] A visit to the museum is also an aid to conception because as J. H. Plumb has observed, in the world revealed by old paintings there is no separate realm of childhood: in a painting by Brueghel, for example, a *“coarse village festival [is] depicted, . . . showing men and women besotted with drink, groping each other with unbridled lust, [and] children eating and drinking with adults.”*[iii]



Pieter Brueghel II (The Younger) , “Village Fair” (Village festival in Honour of Saint Hubert and Saint Anthony). Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The concept of “childhood,” Aries argues, first appeared in the 1600’s and gradually developed when children began to be distinguished from adults in everything from clothing fashions to norms of acceptable behavior. Speculation about the special nature of the “child” began then, and along with the development of schools and curricula. By the same token, “adulthood” became something to achieve – a guild with its own knowledge (e.g., reading) and secrets (e.g., sex) that “children” had to be prepared for or initiated into.

Childhood did not, however, arise full blown overnight. Its development was gradual and fitful. While at first a luxury of the privileged classes, “childhood” and its perquisites came to be seen (under the inspiration of John Locke and Henri Rousseau) as the birthright of any child (*qua* “child”). But this democratic impulse suffered setbacks along the way – for example, during the Industrial Revolution when youths, once again, found themselves laboring alongside adults; indeed, the popularity of Dickens’ novels, for example, might be said to

reflect the cultural collision that occurred when “children,” trailing Wordsworthian “clouds of glory,” were seen working in mines and sweat shops. At the same time, “childhood” did not occur in all places at once; even today, in some places in the world, it seems for many to have never occurred at all.



“Snap the Whip,” Winslow Homer (1872). Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

In the United States, a pervasive notion of childhood might be reckoned to have begun in the mid-nineteenth century. While there were certainly some well-to-do parents before that time who were aware of European fashions and who had the means to coddle their offspring in that special and leisurely period of time known as childhood, for the most part (in a largely agrarian culture and in the busy beginnings of the country) children were required to quickly put childhood behind them and enter adulthood with dispatch, to help on the farm and become mature providers as soon as possible. A real interest children and in the special nature of childhood did not occur in America until after 1865 when, for example, child-labor laws were introduced, the public school movement was begun, pediatrics was accepted as a legitimate specialty in medical schools, social and governmental agencies concerned with child welfare were created, and so forth. As Neil Postman has

observed, *"If we use the word children in the fullest sense in which the average American understands it, childhood [in America] is not much more than a hundred and fifty years old."*[iv]

If "childhood" is a relatively new concept, "children's literature" might be reckoned an even more recent phenomenon. Historians generally point to its origin with John Newbery, the English bookseller who in the 1740's established the trade of publishing books directly intended for children. During that era, however, "children's literature" was not as discrete as we have come to think of it; in addition to imaginative works, it included folklore which had always had an audience of all ages (fairy tales, ballads about Robin Hood, legends of King Arthur, and the like) and works which seem more an adjunct to child-raising than imaginative literature (ABC and toy books, volumes on courtesy and manners, exemplary spiritual biographies, and lessons about good and bad apprentices). Generally speaking, prior to the 1850's, children's literature was in its infancy and a feeble branch of letters; few people besides literary historians are likely to recognize, for example, the names of Hannah More and Peter Parley. After the 1850's, however, children's literature became a genuinely robust genre, with the appearance of such authors as Lewis Carroll, Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, Jules Verne, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

Henry Steele Commager explains the situation in this way. In the past, children and adults shared equally in "the great tradition of literature" – which extended from Aesop, Plutarch, King Arthur, and Perrault; through Pilgrim's Progress, Robinson Crusoe, and Gulliver's Travels; to Scott, Austen, the Brontes and Dickens in England or, in America, to Cooper, Poe, and Longfellow. [v] But somewhere along the way, in the nineteenth century, arose a distinct category of children's literature. This occurred, some scholars have suggested, when something called "adult literature" was

invented and veered away from the mainstream of “the great tradition.” The remnant, “children’s literature,” arose by default.[vi]

## **2. The Disappearance of Childhood & the Boom in Children’s Books**

Now let us jump to the present. During the 1980’s, social critics began to lament (as the title of Neil Postman’s book had it) “*The Disappearance of Childhood.*” These critics – besides Postman, Marie Winn in *Children Without Childhood*, David Elkind in *The Hurried Child* – predicted a return to earlier condition when children were not separated from adults. As proof of their contentions, they point to an abundance of evidence – for example:

- In talking about the development of the concept of childhood, Aries had spoken of the rise of taboo knowledge (particularly sex). Now, television programs at any time of day routinely address subjects (from hermaphroditism to spouse swapping) that were once deemed too sensitive for tender years.
- In an earlier era, films featured Jackie Coogan and Shirley Temple, actors and actresses who were conspicuously children – in fact, exaggerated children. Nowadays, we are given transistorized adults and Lolita’s; and it is difficult to imagine their contemporary counterparts (Gary Coleman and Brooke Shields, for example) tipping and swaying to a song like “The Good Ship Lollipop.”
- While the distinction between juvenile and adult court systems seemed important in an earlier era, it now seems arbitrary when the label “gang member” is no longer applied to Al Capone-like adults but usually used to describe metropolitan youths not yet old enough to vote.



Shirley Temple

I am only citing some of the abundant evidence these social critics offer as proof of the disappearance of childhood. That change is something they lament. They argue that the humane and liberal concept of childhood (invented in the sixteenth century, according to Aries) is being dismantled before our eyes.

If these critics are correct, then we might reasonably expect a waning of interest in and the disappearance of children's literature. Here, however, we are faced with apparently contradictory evidence. Children's book publishing is booming and interest in children's literature has been growing by leaps and bounds.

### ***The Boom in Kiddie Lit***

The most remarkable trend in American publishing circles in the last decade or so is what magazines have termed the "Boom in Kiddie Lit." While sales in all other areas have been down, between 1982 and 1990 sales of children's books quadrupled in the United States; in fact, some publishers have said that their Children's Departments have been the only thing that has

kept their firms afloat during economic hard times. In addition, in 1990, circulation figures from the children's sections of public libraries indicated that book borrowing is up 54 percent from the already high figures of the year before.

This same interest in children's books has been occurring at American universities. Children's Literature used to be a minor enterprise, a class offered only to would-be schoolteachers by a university's Education Department. All that has changed. Now, by my count, more than 200 universities (including major universities like Princeton, Dartmouth, and Cornell) regularly offer courses in Children's Literature in their English Departments. Given the chance, students have poured into these courses. A course taught at the University of Connecticut regularly enrolls more than 300 students a term. My own experience has been no different: in 1982 I offered a course in Children's Literature at UCLA and 325 students signed up; since then, my courses elsewhere have been equally swollen. Across the country, the story is no different: enrollments are likewise measured in hundreds.

This same growing interest in children's literature can be seen in literary scholarship in the United States. In the last two decades or so, the field has begun to enjoy some of the prestige it has long had in Europe and even become something of a boom industry. University presses have begun to publish monographs in what they see as a "coming" field. Scholarly journals have appeared. Professional organizations have sprung up. The prestigious Modern Languages Association has raised Children's Literature from a Discussion Group to the status of a Division. And the National Endowment for the Humanities has begun to regularly fund Institutes devoted to its study.

### **3. Nostalgia & the Merging of Children's and Adult Literatures**

So, we encounter a paradox. On the one hand, social critics



point to an abundance of evidence and argue convincingly that in America the notion of childhood is disappearing. On the other hand, evidence points to an extraordinary growth of interest in children's books – in the sales figures posted by publishers, in university classrooms, and among literary scholars. How can this paradox be explained?

Many may not be pleased with the likely answer. If childhood is truly disappearing, then tremendous growth of interest in children's books may reflect adult nostalgia for a notion in its evanescence, in a twilight period just before its disappearance.

This may explain many things. Take the extraordinary growth in the sales of children's books. This has been occurring at a time when the actual number of children in the population has decreased. While sales of children's books nearly quadrupled between 1982 and 1990, in 1985 the number of children (aged five to thirteen) reached a twenty-five-year low, and in 1987 births were just a little more than half (58%) of what they were in 1957. Moreover, figures for childless couples and single-person households have risen considerably.[vii] What the dramatic increase in the sales of children's books may suggest, then, is a considerable adult interest in children's books. In fact, several years ago, writer James Marshall told me that marketing studies done by publishers indicated that one third of all illustrated children's books are purchased by adults who don't plan to pass them along to children.

As for the incredible surge in enrollments in children's literature classes offered by universities, I have no statistical or hard information to draw upon. I can only proceed anecdotally. When I ask the hundreds of students who enroll in my classes what brings them there, most often what I hear is that they have come to read the works they didn't have a chance to read in childhood.

## **What was children's literature?**

And as for the dramatic growth of interest in children's literature in scholarly circles, Postman may have an answer: *"The best histories of anything are produced when an event is completed, when a period is waning. . . . Historians usually come not to praise but to bury. In any event, they find autopsies easier to do than progress reports."*[viii] The genuine subject of literary scholars, in other words, may be "What was children's literature."

Henry Steele Commager's point was that children's literature arose when the great tradition of literature shared equally by children and adults (Aesop, King Arthur, fairy tales, and the like) parted into two streams: children's and adult literature. If the notion of childhood is disappearing, then we are likely to see is what we are now, in fact, seeing: how those two streams are merging together once again and how children's literature per se is disappearing.

## **Books for children and adults together**

In the last few decades, we have seen the rise of that kind of book Randall Jarrell (thinking of his own work) described as "half for children, half for grown-ups." [ix] Isaac Bashevis Singer's work provides an example. Russell Hoban's provides another; in this era, Hoban has said, "Books in a nameless category are needed – books for children and adults together." [x] And, of course, the rise of adolescent "problem novels" – which take up previously taboo subjects (prostitution, incest, drug-taking, *et al.*) – also suggests the evaporation of boundaries between children's and adult literature. From Hoban's existential fable *Mouse and his Child* (with its joking reference to Sartre) to Judy Blume's sexually explicit *Forever*, what we are encountering are works not written for "children of all ages" but for "adults of all ages."

Another kind of evidence of the collapse of boundaries between

children's and adult literature may found in the last few decades in the renewed interest in classic fairy tales – in works as diverse as Anne Sexton's collection of poems titled *Transformations*, Stephen Sondheim's play *Into the Woods*, the Disney film *Beauty and the Beast*, and Bruno Bettelheim's scholarly study *The Uses of Enchantment*. As Commanger suggested, fairy tales were shared equally by children and adults before the great tradition of literature parted into two, age-determined streams. The contemporary interest in this shared literature may now suggest that these two streams are once again merging.

One final suggestion of this erasure of boundaries between adult and children's literature might be found in a least likely place – in the world of picture books. Beginning with the publication of *Outside Over There* in 1981, Maurice Sendak's publisher (Harper Row) has simultaneously announced his subsequent books (including *Dear Mili* and *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack & Guy*) on both their adult's and children's lists. During the 1980's, two of Dr. Seuss' books – his parable about the arms race (*The Butter Battle Book*) and his geriatric fable (*You Only Grow Old Once!*) – appeared on adult bestseller lists.

Of course, in this short period of time I have only been able to provide a few examples which offer intimations that children's literature *per se* is disappearing. Let me end by telling you of a conversation I had with a former student who now works in Hollywood. For the last few years, her job has been to search out and identify children's books that may be made into films. She has now concluded that it is no longer possible to make traditional films like *Old Yeller* or Disney's *Cinderella* and *Pollyanna*. Despite the fact that movie studios still try to market such concoctions (e.g., *Pocahontas*), children who have grown up with Bart Simpson or Beavis and Butthead no longer care for them. Children have become more cynical, more parodistic, more adult-like. Sensibilities

have changed.

As an example, we might point to Stephen Spielberg's *Hook*. This film is a gloss on James Barrie's *Peter Pan* and its sequel. But what is important to note is that it no longer seemed possible to simply put Barrie's children's story on film. What was additionally needed in Spielberg's film was a parodistic overlay, the insertion of the fast mouth and witticisms of the actor Robin Williams, the addition of an adult and an adult perspective – as if Bart Simpson was retelling the story of Peter Pan.[xi] In this way, let me suggest, we have another example of the disappearance of children's literature *per se*, and of the gradual erosion of barriers between children's and adult literature and the emergence of a “shared” story.

But Spielberg's *Hook*, like other contemporary movies,[xii] shows something else. The storyline that is laid down on top of a retelling of *Peter Pan* is the story of a workaholic adult whose life has become sterile and valueless but who is redeemed when he is stripped of everything adult-like (from his cell phone to his very maturity) and who is transformed when he finally becomes a kid again (even engaging in a food fight). In other words, what frames this presentation of Barrie's classic children story is an account of an adult “getting in touch” with his “missing child.” Let me suggest that there is a parable here: what we see is not only the disappearance of childhood and children's literature *per se* in our own time, but also the nostalgia felt for their loss.

## Notes.

[i]. Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. Robert Baldrick (New York: Random House, 1962).

[ii]. Marie Winn, *Children without Childhood* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 88.

[iii]. J. H. Plumb, “The Great Change in Children,” *Horizon*

13, 1 (Winter 1971), 7. Qtd. in Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982), 15–16.

[iv]. Postman, xi.

[v]. Henry Steele Commager, "Introduction to the First Edition" in *A Critical History of Children's Literature*, ed. Cornelia Miegs, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1969), xii-xiv.

[vi]. Felicity A. Hughes, "Children's Literature: Theory and Practice," *ELH* 45,3 (Fall 1978), 542-61.

[vii]. Information from the U. S. Bureau of Census. See: "Fertility of American Women: June 1987," Series P-20, №427; March 2, 1990 press release (CB90–38), "Population Aged 35 to 44 Growing the Fastest."

[viii]. Postman, 5.

[ix]. Mary Jarrell, "Note" to recording of Randall Jarrell reading *The Bat-Poet*, Caedmon record TV 1364 (New York, 1972). See: Griswold, *The Children's Books of Randall Jarrell* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 52ff.

[x]. Russell Hoban, "Thoughts on a shirtless cyclist, Robin Hood, Johann Sebastian Bach, and one or two other things," *Children's Literature in Education* 4 (Mar. 1971), 23.

[xi]. In the film *Aladdin*, Williams had a similar role.

[xii]. Compare Tom Hanks in *Big*, George Burns in *Eighteen Again*, and Dudley Moore in *Like Father, Like Son*.

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