Children's Literature Grows Up

Abstract
Children's Literature Grows Up proposes that there is a revolution occurring in contemporary children’s fiction that challenges the divide that has long existed between literature for children and literature for adults. Children’s literature, though it has long been considered worthy of critical inquiry, has never enjoyed the same kind of extensive intellectual attention as adult literature because children’s literature has not been considered to be serious literature or "high art." Children's Literature Grows Up draws upon recent scholarship about the thematic transformations occurring in the category, but demonstrates that there is also an emerging aesthetic and stylistic sophistication in recent works for children that confirms the existence of children’s narratives that are equally complex, multifaceted, and worthy of the same kind of academic inquiry that is afforded to adult literature.

This project investigates the history of children’s literature in order to demonstrate the way that children’s literature and adult literature have, at different points in history, grown closer or farther apart, explores the reasons for this ebb and flow, and explains why contemporary children’s literature marks a reunification of the two categories. Employing J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter novels as a primary example, Children’s Literature Grows Up demonstrates that this new kind of contemporary children’s fiction is a culmination of two traditions: the tradition of the readerly children’s book and the tradition of the writerly adult novel.

With the fairy tales, mythologies, legends, and histories that contemporary writers weave into their texts, contemporary fictions for children incorporate previous defining characteristics of children’s fantasy literature and tap into our cultural memory; with their sophisticated style, complex narrative strategies, and focus on characterization, these new fictions display the realism and seriousness of purpose which have become the adult novel’s defining features.

Children's Literature Grows Up thus concludes that contemporary children’s fiction’s power comes from the way in which it combines story and art by bringing together both the children’s literature tradition and the tradition of the adult novel, as well as the values to which they are allied. Contemporary writers for children therefore raise the stakes of their narratives and change the tradition by moving beyond the expected conventions of their category.