The Micro Anthology of Children’s Literature

Edited by: Whit Jones

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Introduction to *The Micro Anthology of Children’s Literature*

Dear Reader,

The literary journey you’re about to embark on has been hand selected with care with three goals in mind: first, to give you a glimpse into what childhood was like spanning from the 1600’s to the mid-twentieth century. Second, to allow you to see the educational materials children had at their family’s approval. Third, and perhaps most importantly, to entertain as well as instruct you on a variety of literature aimed at children throughout the past three centuries. Overall, this is meant to be an easily digestible selection of texts to allow for a brief introduction on a topic of literature that is often overlooked by scholars.

You will notice that this text is broken down into different sections for easier reading. It is important to note that the order is chronological relative to the societal roles of children at any given time period. For example, as stories were often passed down as oral tales before the invention of the printing press we’ve chosen to begin with fables. One literary work of each section will be discussed in brief here as an introduction to the history and context of the listed piece. All other texts listed can be found in our “Further Reading” section at your convenience.

We will start at the beginning with a small discussion on the brothers Grimm, as you may be very familiar with their notoriously macabre fairy tales. The reason behind this is no surprise at all to anyone who is familiar with the various “evolutions” of how society has perceived children and the idea of childhood. As the brothers were born in the 1700’s at the height of the “sinful” child perception, their every story was infused with horror as a means of discipline. This went right along with the idea that children were just inept, miniature adults. In this delightful story you’ll be treated to a tale of starving family of woodcutters, repeated attempts at child neglect due to starvation, and the children’s ingenuity and outwitting both their parents and the witch that pursues them.

Like the Grimm tale, The Fox Without A Tail again uses ingenuity to get out of a bad situation, but instead when the fox’s tail is cut off to save himself the embarrassment he instead attempts to pass it off as a new fashion so at least he would not be alone in his folly.

Follies abound in fairy tales, as the next story by Hans Christian Anderson details the account of a musical war between China and Japan’s nightingales. Initially, the whole of China loves the song of the living nightingale until Japan makes a mechanical replica. Henceforth the living bird is exiled and replaced with the new one, until no one thinks to wind up the mechanical bird and it no longer makes its beautiful music. Time passes, the emperor falls ill, and is treated once again to the real nightingale’s song and brought back to full health.

Each of these stories are meant to entertain or instruct on some level. For the children or families reading these stories together one may expect that such stories would be provided to give incentive for model behavior, good morals, and the avoidance of silly mistakes in the name of sins such as vanity or pride.

Fairy tales and fables weren’t the only books meant to instruct children. Indeed, they have their own section for a reason. Anna Barbauld was one of the first to introduce books for toddlers, as her works Lessons for Children exemplifies with small words, large print, and very simple sentences or sentence fragments that small children could understand. This piece really drives home that small children were inept adults as many of the commands Barbauld recommends are to do with etiquette and social graces. Likewise, Lewis Carroll also intends to instruct children on how to write a proper letter so that they don’t make mistakes and can be taken almost as seriously as adults. I encourage you to read it if you’re curious, although the methodology is dated by far, it still has some very useful tips if your letter writing skills are wanting.

If you find instructions on letter writing or baby’s first instructions tedious, might I suggest a picture book for a little fun? Where The Wild Things Are is included in this micro anthology for two reasons: it is entertaining, and it shows a shift in perception from children being small adults to children being perceived as romantic. (For your information, dear reader, in this instance I am using the word “romantic” to mean innocent, pure, and free of adult burdens). The idea of the romantic child is one I’m sure you are familiar with: children are to be protected and nurtured and kept innocent from the cruelties of the world for as long as possible. This came about in the late twentieth century and exists in the modern day.

Perhaps you feel you’ve outgrown picture books? Not to worry, I have also included a few adventures, both of which can be appreciated across ages. One is short and one is remarkably long, but I promise both are worth your time. Treasure Island is said to be the ah, ‘maiden voyage’ of the pirate genre. Here, you will find every bit of dubloons and mutiny your heart desires. To those interested in literary analysis, I challenge you to discover in your own time why the pirates are considered “bad” outside of the crimes they commit. However, if you’re looking for a purer, less gruesome time I highly recommend Winnie-The-Pooh.

Treasure Island too much to be able to read in one sitting? We have that covered too with our short collection of poems, both written by the same author. They’re very short, sweet, and one again extolls the duties of children. Namely, they must behave. Pirate Story, while no Treasure Island, brings forth pleasant mental imagery of children at play.

“Ah,” I hear you say, “But I have grown tired of adventuring. Is there any text that mimics daily life?” Well, yes. Yes, there is. Maria Edgeworth is rather famous for her domestic fiction. In The Birth-Day present, we read about a mother chiding her daughter for being rather jealous that her friend gets all sorts of lovely things for her birthday. Again, it is understood that this text is meant to both entertain and instruct on manners and virtues of a good child. Unlike other authors of her time, Ms. Edgeworth was a bit of a revolutionary and progressive in some of her works. Rather leaning in the opposite direction of the sinful child view that was prevalent at the time, her texts were very frank and to the point even on subjects that were often taboo.

As a last bit of fun for you, darling reader, and for having the patience to read through this introduction, we have included Struwwelpeter. It is a parody on cautionary tales at the time, and very entertaining to read. We won’t give away the ending, but the editing department about died of laughter when they read it.

We hope you enjoy this hand picked selection of children’s literature and hope that you are both delighted and entertained by our collection.

Sincerely,

Whit Jones

Editor

Word count: 1363

For Further Reading…

Milne, A A, and Ernest H. Shepard. Winnie-the-pooh. New York: Dell, 1979.

Andersen, H. C. (Hans Christian), 1805-1875. The Nightingale. Natick, MA :Picture Book Studio USA : Distributed by Alphabet Press, 1984.

Brothers Grimm ; illustrated by Anthony Browne. Hansel And Gretel. London; New York, N.Y. :Julia MacRae Books, 1981.

Carroll, Lewis. (2006). *Eight or Nine Words on Letter Writing*. Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg.