

David Rudd, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*, Routledge, 2009. xvi + 320 pp. \$32.95 (hardcover). ISBN 9780415472715.

Reviewed by Ernest Davis

Children's literature has at least a half-dozen Companions, as well as several Encyclopedias and hundreds of Guides. "Companion" is a vague term, encompassing books of quite different kinds. For example *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, by Humphrey Carpenter and Mani Pritchard, is actually an encyclopedia, with articles on authors, books, characters, illustrators, and many other topics. But it *is* indeed a beloved and well-thumbed companion, remarkably comprehensive and well-written, equally valuable for consulting as a reference and for pleasant browsing.

The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature, by contrast, is essentially a textbook for an undergraduate course on postmodern critical methods as applied to children's literature. It is divided into four parts, plus a bibliography of 750 items and an index. Part I is a collection of eleven essays, each 12 or 13 pages, on topics of critical interest. Each essay concludes with a short annotated bibliography for further reading. Part II is an encyclopedia of articles up to 3 pages long on terms and persons that arise in the critical literature. Any term that is the keyword of an article in part II is displayed in boldface in the texts of the articles in parts I and II, like cross-references in Wikipedia. This alerts the reader to the existence of the article, if she wants more information, but it is also a distraction; I am not sure it is a good idea. Part III is a timeline. Part IV is a two-page list of resources: journals, organizations, and online discussion groups.

Readers, like myself and, I expect, most of the readers of Mythprint, who are more interested in children's literature than in its criticism, and who pick up this book in order to learn something about children's literature, will be disappointed. Except in the timeline, the texts discussed were chosen in order to illustrate aspects of critical methods. Preference seems to have been given to texts that are familiar to current college students. Accordingly there is a strong emphasis on recent books — post-1950 and even post-1995 — as opposed to earlier books; on books for adolescents rather than for younger children; on books in English rather than other languages. The two books most often mentioned are *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*. Many important genres and issues are omitted or nearly so. There is no discussion of adventure stories or of animal stories, even though the editor, David Rudd, himself wrote an article on animal stories for the *Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*. There is no discussion of the role of religion in children's literature. There is an article on "Picturebooks, comics, and graphic novels", but no discussion of illustration, and no mention anywhere in the book of classic illustrators such as Shepherd, Wyeth, Tasha Tudor, etc. (Sendak is discussed several times, mostly in connection with *Where the Wild Things Are*. Howard Pyle and Arthur Rackham are each mentioned once, in the part II articles on "phallogocentrism" and "orientalism" respectively. Beatrix Potter is included in the timeline.)

The most interesting of the essays in part I is an article, "Sidelines: Some neglected dimensions of children's literature and its scholarship" (i.e. neglected in the critical literature) by Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles with Abigail Robison. These dimensions include autobiography, literature written by children, writings by parents for their own children, oral tradition, poetry, and plays for children. The authors are properly indignant that poetry has ended up in this list of also-rans, given the large quantity and high quality of children's poetry. This essay is all too brief, but is full of interesting leads in these many areas.

The article "Picturebooks, comics, and graphic novels" by Mel Gibson, makes some interesting observations about the relation between graphic style and content in graphic novels. Unfortunately the article is much less useful than it could have been, because there are no illustrations, here or anywhere else in the book; the publisher was too lazy or too cheap to bother getting the rights.

To her credit, Victoria Flanagan in her article "Gender studies" does not waste much time decrying sexism in classic children's books, which would be shooting fish in a barrel. Instead, she

discusses books (almost all very recent) that she considers make an honest effort to deal with gender issues sensitively and helpfully.

Aside from these, there is an article on realism that argues that all realistic fiction is didactic; an article on fantasy from a psychological (essentially Freudian) perspective; an article on media adaptations which traces the various media in which “His Dark Materials” has appeared; an article on racism and colonialism (though, interestingly, none on classism); an article on narratology (narrative structure and literary devices); an article on young adult fiction and the “crossover phenomenon”, the astonishing fact that adults read children’s literature; an article on Theory; and an introductory overview. Some of these I found doctrinaire and wrong-headed, others I found open-minded and harmless; but I did not find any of them particularly informative, insightful, or thought-provoking.

Part II is in encyclopedia format; a collection of (by my quick count) 114 articles, arranged alphabetically by topic, in double column, by various authors. 43 of these are critical terminology, 46 are persons (contributors to critical discourse, not authors of children’s books), 7 are critical schools or modes such as “postmodernism”, 9 are genres, 3 are literary devices, and 6 are on other topics, such as “animation”. The topics chosen for inclusion here are for the most part ones that arise in the essays; overall, therefore, it is a somewhat haphazard collection. For example there is an article on “animation” with descriptions of cel animation and CGI, and an article on “Disneyfication” but no article on “film”. The only three literary devices that earn an article are “focalization”, “free indirect discourse”, and “metafiction”.

At least fifteen of the articles are about professors here and there who specialize in children’s literature, an unusual emphasis for a general book of this kind. However, I did get some perverse pleasure out of the article on Prof. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, Director of the Centre for International Research in Childhood at the University of Reading, who feels that *no* literature is good for children, and that a good course of individualized psychotherapy is much healthier.

Part III, the timeline, is the only section of the book that is primarily focussed on literature rather than criticism; it was presumably compiled by the editor David Rudd. He seems rather embarrassed by it. In fact, he uses four separate distancing techniques to separate himself from something so unsophisticated as a timeline. First, he says that these kinds of lists are suspect because they endorse an established canon and privilege certain kinds of texts over others. Second, he says that assigning dates is suspect because (a) the calendar shifted from the Julian to the Gregorian; (b) some books, such as *Gulliver’s Travels* were published in varying forms over an interval of time. The silliness of both of these objections to dates reveals how uncomfortable the postmodernist is with anything resembling a fact. There are many events whose dates are uncertain or vague, but with few exceptions, the years of publication for books in the last two centuries are as close to certain as anything can be. Third, his comments on well-known books tend to be jokey though not actually funny. Fourth, he includes jokey items, such as the invention of bubble gum and the founding of McDonald’s, whose sole reason for inclusion is to allow us all to join in a collective sneer at American popular culture.

For the intended audience — that is, students interested in postmodernist criticism of children’s literature — this collection is no doubt somewhat useful. However, it has little to offer to a reader whose goal is to deepen his/her knowledge of children’s literature.