

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Space and Place in Children's Literature, 1789 to the Present*, edited by Maria Sachiko Cecire, Hannah Field, Kavita Mudan Finn and Malini Roy (Routledge, 2015)**

Children's literature in its early days was never written solely for children. Myths and legends were aimed at a mixed audience of adults and children; often these stories were instructional and pious. The father of children's literature, John Newbery, was the first to prove the economical returns of the genre, that it was a sustainable industry and could generate commercial success. By the later part of the eighteenth century, children's literature expanded rapidly. A whole series of factors could have influenced the rapid growth: a growing middle class, new innovations in book productions or new ways of looking at childhood.

However, one does not get to see this aspect of children's literary history in this book. The book is a collection of articles which came out of a conference on 'place and space in children's literature' held at the University of Oxford in 2009. This explains why the focus of the book remains that – analysing and examining the meanings of space and place in children's literature. The book is divided into four parts, each part consists of two to three articles on various sub-topics: The Spaces between Children and Adults; Real-World Places; Traversing the Imaginary and Book Space. It is a rich collection written by scholars and specialists of children's literature not only by those who live in the United Kingdom but also those who live in Europe, South Africa and the United States. With contributions from writers of diverse backgrounds, the book has successfully examined texts across periods, genres and national traditions which makes the book inclusive, offering various perspectives on space and place. It is pointed out in the Introduction how, for the past 300 years, children's literature has been written for children who were predominantly white, middle-class and heterosexual (5). The book offers multiple, and often postcolonial perspectives, bringing to the centre questions on who is the child, and what is the relationship between the social and physical place of children and adult power. Peter Hunt in his article 'Unstable Metaphors: Symbolic Spaces and Specific Places' asserts that storytelling is about power and that there is a need to strike a balanced power between the adult writer and the child reader which is rare to achieve (23).

Aneesh Barai in her article 'Speaking the Space between Mother and Child: Sylvia Plath, Julia Kristeva and the Place of Children's Literature' explores Kristeva's theory on mother-child relations and her semiotic reading of Plath's work which focuses on studying the relation between poetic language and maternity. The article convinces us that a feminist reading of children's literature would offer us a better understanding of maternity and Plath has successfully used physical spaces in the home to connect to the idea of motherhood from a domestic setting (52).

Part two of the book looks at issues surrounding using real-world places and the impact real space and place might have on child readers. Francesca Orestano's 'The Neapolitan Gouache of a Strong-minded English Lady: "The Little Merchants" by Maria Edgeworth' focuses on the use of a long literary tradition which allows writers to use places they have never visited as the settings of their stories. Edgeworth did this in her story 'The Little Merchants: A Tale' in which Naples and its renowned environs are used as a background landscape to the story (taken from picturesque guide books). Realistic situations are used to assert moral issues and it is clear that Edgeworth is not very concerned with description or aesthetic objects but would resort to that old-fashioned way of telling a story: to instruct and assert on the idea of reward and punishment as an important pedagogical element in educating a child (58). Orestano's mix of children of various nationalities (the child

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protagonist is Italian who meets a few English characters) is seen as an effort to teach notions of geography, geology, archaeology and economics (if not capitalism) as asserted by Wilkes:

we are shown how young people must apply themselves to the tasks of the new industries if they and their families are to thrive in the new economy, and just as importantly, if they are to develop and to hold on to their moral character. (72)

Renata Morresi's 'Borders, *Pachangas*, and Chicano/a Children's Picture Books' takes us to a different level of interculturalism in that it highlights issues of identity, self-awareness, representation, and access to literary and social integration as well as language use and other forms of cross-cultural encounters. This article discusses the distorted history of Chicano/a Children's Literature in which the Chicano/a child is often portrayed as backward and ill-bred. The 1974 Bilingual Education Act was a turning point for Chicano/a children as Chicano/a history was revisited and reinterpreted. As history is reinterpreted, stories which celebrate Chicano/a hybrid identity and culture trigger a sense of self-awareness to specifically Chicano/a children. Morresi cites Azade Seyhan as saying,

Multiple migrations end in the loss of our homes, possessions, and memorabilia. When the smoke clears, we are faced with charred pieces of identification, shards of language, burned tongue, and cultural fragments. However, from the site of this fire, the phoenix of a transnational, bi- and multilingual literature has arisen. (87)

Parts three and four explore what imagination in the form of space and place in children's literature can do to a child. Citing Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, Maria Sachiko Cecire's article on 'English Exploration and Textual Travel in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*' highlights how C.S. Lewis as the author of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* used mediaeval elements, the legacy of early modern explorations and nineteenth- to early twentieth-century imperialist adventure narratives to shape ideas of national and cultural identity in the English child (112-13). Such an employment in children's fantasy literature marks a new approach in striking a balance between educating both children and adults about the idea of English identity and nationhood.

The whole idea to instruct and delight continues to pervade the remaining chapters of the book and Philip Pullman's 'Epilogue: Inside, Outside, Elsewhere' sums up children's literature's past, present and future, outlining the joy and threats of children's literature specifically in the digital age with regard to interpretations of texts and pictures one would encounter in children's literature. He explains the importance of understanding the concept of the 'borderland' which will help a child (and adult) achieve a new way of looking at things. There is some magic in the borderland which keeps attracting readers to read and reread, says Pullman (219).

*Space and Place in Children's Literature, 1789 to the Present* makes an important referral source for those researching or writing on Children's Literature.

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