

# Current Trends in Literature for Children

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IN THE FUTURE STUDY of children's literature, the years between 1960 and 1985 will prove significant because of two major, multifaceted influences that have expanded and revolutionized the field of children's books; (1) changes in the world of children's publishing; and (2) changes in the sociopolitical climate of the country. Debate may range over the positive or negative aspects in each area, but there can be little argument over the impact.

From 1918—generally earmarked as the beginning of children's book publishing in the United States—throughout the late 1950s, children's books enjoyed a relatively stable period characterized by predictable plots, essential decency, and restrained good fun. It has been said that literature for children mirrors society—i.e., reflecting the culture of the time and the way children are perceived and treated.

## Changes in the Children's Publishing Market

In the early 1960s, the economic backbone of children's publishing was significantly altered as publishing departments were expanded to meet a new demand for children's books and the sociopolitical climate of the country underwent upheaval. These events triggered changes in the children's book field that continue to evolve today.

When the first editorial departments were formed prior to 1920 specifically to publish children's books, the editors hired to spearhead these new ventures had library and educational backgrounds. The titles

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they published reflected that expertise. Shaped by a librarian's hand, the books were designed to attract a library market. Virtually every picture book, novel, and nonfiction title was distinctly child oriented; stories contained pristine characters and uplifting themes; and informational titles fit prescribed curricula. Librarians worked closely with their editor colleagues, providing input into editorial decisions and ascertaining what children should and should not read. Scott Elledge's *E.B. White: A Biography* (Norton, 1984) reveals letters from New York Public librarian Anne Carroll Moore, who after reading the manuscript of *Stuart Little*, wrote to Ursula Nordstrom, White's editor at Harper, telling her emphatically not to publish the book. These publisher-librarian relationships gradually changed as new personnel entered the field, but the established patterns remained in place for decades.

Then a new influence—finance—made itself felt in the children's book field, bringing new directions that would have far-reaching effects. In the aftermath of Sputnik, millions of dollars were pumped into the schools through NDEA grants, mandating libraries to expand and refurbish science, mathematics, and foreign language collections and, in a later extension known as Title II, social studies materials. With nearly unlimited funds, librarians sought a variety of materials to meet the changing curricula and the renewed emphasis on reading.

Seeing the demand, publishers quickly stepped in to meet the need. Books were rushed to press, sales soared, and library collections bulged. This booming prosperity also brought book publishing under the eye of Wall Street and its acquisition-hungry conglomerates, ever watchful for money-making opportunities. Publishing companies became a part of big business and personnel found it necessary to learn to handle budgets, five-year plans, cost ratios, and bottom lines.

As the demand for books grew, authors and illustrators were actively recruited and encouraged to experiment with their creative powers. This kind of license resulted in beautifully illustrated books and provocative themes stretching the field to new limits. Evidence of this expansion can be observed in a look at the American Library Association's Children's Notable Books lists—in 1956 nineteen titles were selected as worthy of inclusion, four years later the count had risen to forty-one, and by 1968 the list included sixty-two choices.

To handle the increased work load, publishing staffs were expanded—assistant editors, art directors, and publicists swelled the ranks. Library and educational backgrounds were no longer requisite for personnel; liberal arts and journalism graduates with an interest in publishing, assistants who worked themselves up through the ranks,

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marketing department employees with a taste for editorial concerns, and, in the bottom-line conscious 1980s, MBAs became the decision-makers. Aggressive and attuned to sales, a new breed had taken hold, shifting the editorial focus. The library market was still a powerful buying force, but its position as the only sales outlet was soon to be challenged.

Federal funding, which had seemed unlimited at its inception, dwindled in the 1970s and publishers, encumbered by heavily staffed departments and stables of authors and illustrators courted in the bountiful years, searched for alternative markets. The one they found—the bookstore—surfaced at just the time when educated, affluent parents, ripe with child-development expertise, were looking for materials for their new offspring. Rarely has need and demand so swiftly meshed.

Grasping at a way to attract the new market, editors experimented with board, bathtub, cloth, and other toybook items. “Baby lit,” as it was dubbed by *Publishers Weekly*, had arrived. The bookstore market also found customers in grandparents wanting to share old favorites with their grandchildren, parents hoping to increase reading scores and instill a joy of reading in their children, and youngsters themselves able to afford books based on motion pictures and television programs and paperback romances. Books designed for a consumer market, rather than a library one, brought a new direction to publishing. An immense push was given by *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, written by newspaperman Jim Trelease, a parent, layperson, and advocate of reading. Skillful publicity made the title an overnight best-seller and Trelease a near-household name. His message about the importance of books and reading helped to intensify and broaden the already growing interest in books for children by the general public.

Aware that buyers for bookstores had neither the expertise in book selection nor the inclination to study the field, publishers began using Madison Avenue marketing tactics. They met the market on its own level by providing a wide variety of familiar titles in new formats, labeling books as sequels and companions to encourage sales, offering vast displays of eye-catching picture books, and packaging books in spiffy dust jackets with inviting titles. The public responded, and the publishers, now confident of their new market, offered more titles with instant purchase appeal. Edward Packard’s Choose-Your-Own Adventure books, which have sold thousands of copies, spawned other participatory series. Mysteries, the occult, romance, and even picture books have not escaped the multiplot gimmick. Paperback romances became the greatest seller of all: the Wild Fire, Sweets Dreams, Silhouette series

were released in quantity and their generic titles often resulted in identification by number. No one claimed they were literature, but their popularity had effect. Traditional hardback publishers raced to give the paperback “fluff” competition, unleashing a rash of romantic novels that, though generally better written, were nevertheless lightweight and breezy.

A particularly unfortunate aspect of the romance genre has been its reliance on stereotyped characters and almost total reflection of white, middle-class, suburban life. The multicultural, realistic themes that emerged in the consciousness-raising 1960s were ignored in the formula-written romance series.

### **Effects of Changes in the Sociopolitical Climate**

The sociopolitical tenor of the country is often cited as a major factor in trends in publishing for children. This influence became keenly felt in the 1960s when upheavals in life-styles, traditions, mores, and language, as well as protests against sexism and racism, brought a new realism to children’s books. Taboos were erased as authors explored themes previously thought unacceptable—i.e., alcoholism, drugs, sex, violence, and divorce.

Published in 1964 and considered a milestone in children’s literature, Louise Fitzhugh’s *Harriet the Spy* (Harper) features a protagonist who spies on others, tells lies, and is often disagreeable. Harriet’s believability as a character and the candor, wit, and satirical bite with which the story unfolds makes it unique. Its controversial nature kept it from being chosen as an ALA Children’s Notable Book during the year of its publication. Six years later, with a more liberal outlook clearly in vogue, it was included in a retrospective 1960-1964 Notable Books List. It deserved a place, according to the selection committee, because the book had “proven its worth in time.”

*Harriet the Spy* along with the *It’s Like This, Cat* by Emily Neville marked the end of the popularity of the group protagonist prevalent in the All-of-a-Kind Family, the Moffats, the Saturdays, and the Borrowers-style books. Interest began to center on the single character in an individual set of circumstances. When feminist concerns came to the forefront, the single character became predominantly female and portrayals were distinctly individualized—girls were clearly in command. Three books, all published in 1973, Ellen Conford’s *Felicia the Critic* (Little Brown), Constance Greene’s *Isabelle the Itch* (Viking), and Stella Pevsner’s *Call Me Heller, That’s My Name* (Clarion) exemplify this

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emergence of strong girl characters. Adult women in stories also changed; no longer humdrum homebodies, they began to appear as either strong, eccentric, elderly mentors or as working mothers with jobs traditionally in the male domain—either way they figured more prominently in the plot.

Sexual balance of characters was not the only change in children's literature resulting from the 1970s sociopolitical climate. Topics such as death and disease were addressed in children's books, often in a stark realistic manner. Although E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (Harper, 1952) evocatively encompassed death in its theme, it was nevertheless a fantasy. However, in books such as James Collier and Christopher Collier's *My Brother Sam is Dead* (Four Winds, 1974) the devastation and death during the Civil War was the main theme. Constance Greene's *Beat the Turtle Drum* (Viking, 1976) and Lois Lowry's *A Summer to Die* (Houghton, 1977) made death even more immediate with contemporary settings and characters. Realistic problem novels became the mode; Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret* (Bradbury, 1970) with its forthright discussion of menstruation and bras, presented one of the truest portrayals ever written of an ordinary preteen's concerns about herself and her daily life. Children eagerly responded; though Blume has not received a major literary award, though adults often do not encourage the reading of her books, and though she has consistently received mixed reviews, there never has been a more sought after author among preteens. Her unprecedented popularity resulted in the phrase the "Blume phenomenon" and her success has led to the publication of hundreds of similar stories, many of which are weak imitations.

The controversial topics that prevailed in the market for preteens in the 1970s are now more common in novels for older teens. Today, stories for younger readers are more likely to deal with everyday concerns such as sibling rivalry, divorce, stepparents, and home relocation. The first-person narrative, unfortunately, has become repetitious in plot and shallow in theme. The problem is often the protagonist and well-defined characterization is lost in the morass.

This preoccupation with problem-oriented plots has led to an emerging trend in children's books—the plotless book. In these books, the author dwells on the relationship between two characters or the adjustment of one to a particular situation. In the best of this genre, such as Paula Fox's *Moonlight Man* (Bradbury, 1986), well-developed portrayals carry the story; however, often the narrative is merely a series of strung together episodes or simply an exploration of feelings.

Historical fiction, a genre that seemed to be on the verge of disappearing in the glare of contemporary problem novels has begun in the mid 1980s to show signs of resurgence. Elizabeth Speare's exquisite novel *Sign of the Beaver* (Houghton, 1983) which received the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction and the awarding of the 1986 Newbery Medal to Patricia MacLachlan for *Sarah Plain and Tall* (Harper, 1985) are sure to revitalize interest in the genre. In this century, most historical fiction for children has used U.S. backgrounds. Even today few novels concern themselves with historical situations in other countries. Lack of interest on the part of children—hence lack of sales—is claimed as the reason, a reason also cited for the small number of translated titles appearing in the literature today.

No discussion of trends would be complete without commenting on the sequel-series syndrome. Though series books (The Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew, Anne of Green Gables) were popular in the 1940s and 1950s, the numbers published decreased with the advent of the single protagonist in the 1970s. In the 1980s it is common to link one book to another through familiar characters such as Ramona, Anastasia, Pinkerton, Miss Nelson, or through a place such as Polk Street School. Classic characters such as Mary Poppins and Dorothy are reappearing in recently published works.

This linking sometimes results in a cycle format, especially prevalent in fantasy. Events in cycle books are often strung out over three or four volumes. Authors attempt to make each novel self-contained with varying degrees of success, but usually readers need the entire series for full impact. Following the successful publication of the Tolkien books and Lewis's Narnia tales, fantasy made a significant comeback in the 1960s and has remained strong through the 1980s. Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (Farrar, 1962) stretched the limits of imagination, breaking old ground rules about separating fantasy from science fiction. As usual, when one author is successful, others begin to experiment and produce varied and extraordinary creations. In addition to Lloyd Alexander's Prydain Chronicles, fresh and ingenious offerings in science fiction, time travel, high fantasy, and other kinds of imaginative tales were brought forth from the pens of Patricia McKillip, Anne McCaffrey, Penelope Lively, Susan Cooper, Natalie Babbitt, and John Christopher.

Another important result of the tumultuous sixties was the recognition of the need for books about minorities. Children, regardless of color, need to be exposed to the life-styles of other cultures. Black authors of talent emerged including Brenda Wilkerson, Tom Feelings, Walter Dean Myers, Eloise Greenfield, Sharon Bell Mathies, Lucille

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Clifton, and John Steptoe, giving dignity and respect a rightful place in books about blacks.

None has gained honors and praise as has Virginia Hamilton. In 1975 she won the first Newbery to be awarded to a black author and also captured the juvenile category of the National Book Awards as well as the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for her novel *M.C. Higgins the Great* (Macmillan, 1974). She continues to garner plaudits for her creative works. Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Dial, 1976) received the Medal for her sensitive portrayal of a black family's struggle during the depression. In 1976, and again in 1977, Leo and Diane Dillon's glowing illustrations for *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* and *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* resulted in two succeeding Caldecott awards.

Though fewer titles initially appeared about Native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and other ethnic groups, the existence of even a few aroused antipathy toward stereotypical treatment of characters and encouraged multicultural portrayals. Accounts of black history, descriptions of protest movements, and profiles of important black leaders were relatively plentiful in the 1970s. However, after an initial surge, the numbers peaked in 1978-79 and rapidly dropped off. The New York Public Library's *Black Experience in Children's Books*, which found 954 titles to include in 1974 but only listed 450 in the 1984 edition, illustrates the point. A beginning resurgence may be seen in the mid 1980s as works by Mildred Pitts Walter, Candy Dawson Boyd, Joyce Hanson, and Emily Moore have begun to appear.

Parallels may be drawn between the emergence and decline of ethnic materials and easy reading books. Concern about reading scores in the 1970s prompted an interest in stories with controlled vocabularies, large type, repetitive word use, and simple plots. Arnold Lobel set a high standard with his Frog and Toad books and soon other authors and illustrators were producing simple but worthwhile tales. Despite the continued need, the number of new offerings has dwindled. Publishers cite inadequate sales and lack of good manuscripts—the same explanations given for the small supply of ethnic materials. Lack of attention in bookstores may well be a major factor in both areas.

### Trends in Picture Books

In the area of the illustrated book, the most outstanding trend in the past twenty years has been in format—the full-color picture book now almost exclusively dominates the field. A few illustrators such as Chris

Van Allsburg and Stephen Gammell also are noted for their black-and-white work, but fewer and fewer are successful in the medium. Today's visually oriented public responds best to color—the more resplendent the better—and with the technological means (high-speed presses, computers and state-of-the-art cameras) to provide it, publishers accommodate.

Illustrations featuring distinct gradations of color, subtle shading, meticulous line work, explicit detail, and varied textures make picture books aesthetically pleasing. At times the elaborate production works against itself. When illustration overwhelms story, making the book only a showcase for the art, then the concept of the picture book—with its delicate balance of illustration and text—is lost. Works of this nature have been labeled “coffee-table picture books.” The majority of works in this genre, however, remain true to intent; their attractive dress has captivated the public, and children are definitely the winners. Care with end papers, front matter, paper quality, type, and page composition is a noteworthy factor in the increasing sophistication and importance of picture books.

In addition to the excellent graphic execution, another new trend in picture books is the broadened range of content. The illustrated editions of individual poems, Bible stories, myths and legends, and folk and fairy tales have taken the picture book beyond its traditional concept and audience. Presentations of Alfred Noyes's poem *The Highwayman* (Lathrop, 1973), an illustrated first chapter of Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, an illustrated version of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, as well as Van Allsburg's *Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (Houghton, 1984), David Macauley's satiric *Baaa* (Houghton, 1985), Toshi Maruki's *Hiroshima No Pika* (Lothrop, 1982), indicate that picture books are also being aimed at older children.

The sophisticated themes found in picture books today prompted the editors of *Booklist*, in the 1 June 1983 issue, to select more than eighty-five titles for a bibliography entitled “Picture Books for Older Children.” The list was updated with fifty additional titles in 1986.

The younger age bracket—babies and toddlers—can draw on an equally lush crop of titles. Offerings by Rosemary Wells, Helen Oxenbury, Ann Rockwell, Donald Crews, Gail Gibbons, and Tana Hoban lead the field in board and early concept books. Subjects such as cars, planes, doctors' offices, shapes, numbers, animals, trucks, and boats that are suitable for young audiences are appropriately backed with large, simple designs, and bright primary colors.

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The public's increasing preference for color over the last decade is probably linked to its fascination with television. This fascination also may be the reason for the increasing influence of animation in picture books. Evidence of this influence may be seen in the cartoon style of James Stevenson and Robert Quackenbush, the energetic lines of Steven Kellogg and Janet Stevens, and the quickened pace of the mechanical books, a popular gimmick from the Victorian era that recently made a reappearance. The pop-up, flip out, fold down, and the lift-the-flap format is artistically and inventively used in titles such as Pienkowski's *Haunted House* (Dutton, 1979), Miller's *The Human Body* (Viking, 1983), Provencens's *Leonardo da Vinci* (Viking, 1984) and de Paola's *Giorgio's Village* (Putnam, 1982). Though these books are produced as gift items for the bookstore market, libraries are finding some engineered books, like those mentioned earlier, as appropriate in introducing story hours.

Along with gimmickry, familiarity is an important element for bookstore buyers and another reason why the seemingly endless editions of alphabet and counting books, retelling of both traditional and lesser-known folk and fairy tales, and the illustrated single editions of other literary forms have exploded onto the market. Five new renditions of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, seven *Hansel and Gretels*, three *Owl and the Pussy Cats*, and six *Snow Queens* within the last several years illustrate the point. Another reason for the plethora of new editions may be that talented illustrators with minimal writing talents can realize higher royalties by circumventing the contribution of an author by using texts in the public domain.

Intriguing parallels can be noted when comparing current fiction trends to those in picture books. Today, plots in both deal with realistic topics—divorce, working mothers and stepparents, as well as death, child abuse, and hospitalization. The portrayal of all-white, conservative, prim children in picture books also gave way in the 1960s to views of multicultural, disheveled, mischievous, and sometimes downright naughty children. In 1963, one year before the publication of *Harriet the Spy*, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (Harper, 1963) set a new tone. Featuring Max, a boy who misbehaves and is sent to his room where he conjures up frightful monsters as revenge, this book was considered by many adults to be too audacious for young children and likely to promote similar brash behavior. Though its popularity with children calmed the maelstrom of controversy, it also triggered a spate of books dealing with children's fears, frustrations, and other emotional responses.

Acceptance of the picture book as an avenue for exploring children's emotional concerns, a positive aspect in itself, may be, however, a contributing factor to the loss of story. Just as in fiction, the plot is too often submerged in the business of addressing the problem.

Mood pieces that only evoke sounds of the night, feelings about a mother working, or smells and sights of a day at the beach may successfully and evocatively succeed in their intent; however, they do not have the power of story—the beginnings, middles, and endings—that children prefer and that all too few authors are providing. Despite these limitations, today's picture books offer a rich and exciting experience for children and one made even richer when perceptive adults provide introduction and interpretation.

### Trends in Nonfiction Books for Children

Information books have undergone perhaps the greatest revolution of all the genres. Scholarly underpinnings and genuine interest on the author's part ensure authenticity and reflect enthusiasm for a subject that encourages a sense of exploration by the reader. Subjects today are approached seriously and without condescension; perceptive, in-depth writing has placed many informational books solidly in the category of quality literature.

A fictionalized, saccharine, often dull approach was prevalent in early series of nonfiction books that were formulaic and usually written on consignment. This trend slowly evolved into books that were well researched, focused on a specific topic of interest, organized into clear, well-defined segments, and supplemented with source materials, bibliographies, and meaningful graphics.

In recent years a more relaxed style has emerged with some writers using a personalized, you-are-there approach. Jill Krementz (*A Very Young Rider*) and Bernard Wolf (*Don't Feel Sorry for Paul*) were early initiators of this practice, which continues to be popular and successful.

A lighter but still factual handling of material is also becoming apparent as exemplified by David Macauley's *Castle* (Houghton, 1977), Tomie de Paola's *Quicksand* (Holiday, 1977), and more recently the David Schwartz/Steven Kellogg *How Much is a Million?* (Lothrop, 1985) in which information is amusingly wrapped in a cocoon of humor. Inviting and inventive, this approach is a great boon in promoting learning.

The trend toward relegating nonfiction to a position of merely a supplement to the curriculum or as an adjunct to a child's hobby has

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been reversed. Books on diverse subjects, ranging from terrorism, mummies, and acid rain to puppeteers, constructing museum models, and underwater photography are now available for young readers. Controversial topics received balanced presentations with biases clearly stated by authors such as Ann Weiss and Laurence Pringle.

Curriculum areas, however, have not been forgotten. Injected with lively writing, specific facts, and anecdotal tidbits, subjects are presented with more clarity and validity than their previously fictionalized counterparts. For example, wildlife books, which continue to encompass a large share of each season's offerings, are for the most part free of anthropomorphism and a storylike approach that tends to confuse children and convey gross inaccuracies.

Care is taken that text and graphics present multicultural images and that females are properly represented. Formerly taboo topics are now found in nonfictional books. Death (Joanne Bernstein, *When People Die*), hospitalization (James Howe, *The Hospital Book*), and the disabled (Ron Roy, *Move Over, Wheelchairs Coming Through!*) are now sensitively and insightfully discussed.

The changing format and appearance of informational books is also important. Photographs—often in full color—are being incorporated more extensively especially in books for older children. When drawings are used, expert draftsmanship and attractiveness are demanded. In some revised editions of earlier works, drawings are replaced by photographs, or art is updated to reflect contemporary times.

Book size, end papers, front matter, amount of white space, paper quality, and type size are carefully planned, lending an aesthetic tone to the overall presentation. Although true for picture books and fiction, these factors are especially obvious in nonfiction. No longer simply decorative, illustrative matter has become integral to the presentation. Placement on the page and relationship of text to graphics are important factors. When well designed, graphics extend the narrative. In the best examples, labeled photographs, drawings, and diagrams contain material relevant to the subject being discussed. In Russell Freedman's *Children of the Wild West* (Clarion, 1983), the caption below a photograph of a pioneer family standing in the doorway of an Oregon cabin points out that a baby sleeps in a cradle made from a packing crate and that a birdcage hangs in the window. This information, which enlarges total understanding, might well be missed without the notation.

Prior to the 1980s, nonfiction has been largely overlooked by award committees. Only a sprinkling of biographies have been singled out as

Newbery winners. However, recent recognition of this genre is evidenced by the awarding of the Newbery Medal to Nancy Willard's poem, *A Visit to William Blake's Inn* (Harcourt, 1981) in 1982, a Newbery honor award to Kathryn Lasky's *Sugaring Time* (Macmillan, 1983) in 1984, a Newbery honor award to Rhoda Blumberg for *Commodore Perry in the Land of the Shogun* (Lothrop, 1985) in 1986, and a Newbery honor to Patricia Lauber for *Volcano* (Bradbury, 1986) in 1987.

Awards propel books into news columns, eliciting attention from an otherwise unaware public. More and more, children's books—specific titles as well as the genre—are receiving press coverage. *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 January 1986, in an article entitled "Children's Books, Selling Like Hotcakes, Tell Kids All About the Cold, Cruel World," states that parents are making children's books the fastest growing market in publishing with "sales expected to exceed \$462 million" in 1986. Not only are these comments intriguing in themselves, but also indicate the growing emphasis on children's books.

A few years ago the demise of children's book publishing seemed imminent. Now the flood gates are opening. Publishing houses that closed their children's departments years ago are now reinstating juvenile lines, long-established houses have announced new imprints, seasonal lists are increasing, educational and mass market companies are expanding with both trade and paperback lists, and small presses are proliferating. If current patterns continue, both quality literature and ephemeral products will flourish.

The paperback field is also changing. As more hardback publishers release their own paperbacks, the paperback companies are revitalizing their own sales through establishment of hardcover lines. Romances continue to make up a large part of this market, though there is some indication that this phenomenon is beginning to fall off. There is growing interest in reprinting classics (Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy*), "recycling" old favorites (Goldsmith's *Return to Treasure Island*), and reissuing popular stories and picture books in paperback.

The burgeoning resurgence throughout the industry will undoubtedly have an impact. The rush to gain a share of the business is already resulting in a number of inferior productions. This fact, however, is balanced by some of the finest writing and art being produced for any age group. As a result some people view the late 20th century as an exciting time with many options and opportunities; to others, it is an era when quality is losing out to inferior, cheap publications. Children who are exposed to the best of today's offerings can reap a richness of

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narrative, a diversity of information, and a sumptuousness of illustration that will provide a meaningful literary and artistic heritage for their years ahead.

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Part II

Landmark books published within the last 20 years, which have influenced or have had long-standing effect on the field of children's books, are listed here.

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