

### 3. Childhood Studies<sup>1</sup>

As could be seen from the above, children's books – whether explicitly or implicitly – convey and discuss societal notions of child and childhood.<sup>2</sup> These ideas are time- and place-, culture- and gender-bound. So when setting to the task of selecting appropriate children's (picture)books it is important to have a closer look at the representation of children and childhood in them to forestall obsolete or inappropriate ideologies to slip through and negatively impact young readers consciously or unconsciously. This is why issues of childhood are thematized in this chapter. They are a particularly intriguing field of research that requires scholars to draw on very many different and very subtle approaches and tools to properly explore childhood representations in texts and pictures. And to assess the meanings and ideologies inherent in this. Within English studies alone the phenomenon can be studied from a broad range of subdisciplinary perspectives. The lens and methods of these studies enable scholars to explore a huge variety of fascinating issues revolving around children and childhood in literature. In the following, those of history, theory, and the suitability of picturebooks shall be addressed.

#### 3.1 The time factor: literary history

As to the factor of time in representations of childhood:

In historical terms, different periods construct childhood differently, and this is represented in the literature produced for the young. For example, during the so-called golden age of children's literature (and particularly in the 1920s and 1930s between the two world wars), there was a desire to emphasize the beauty and innocence of childhood. Just think of Ernest Shepard's enchanting illustrations for A. A. Milne's poetry and his Winnie the Pooh stories – they delighted readers then and are still popular today. We may be living in a so-called postmodern age where playfulness, rule-breaking, fragmentation and uncertainty are commonplace, but romantic and idealized representations of childhood still appeal to adult nostalgia, and are still represented in many picturebooks (Salisbury and Styles 2020: 69).

The revival of obsolete and romanticized notions of childhood happens in different ways: On the one hand, older books which embody such concepts (long since vanished together with the societal contexts that gave rise to them), can be reprinted and brought back to life again in times of a totally different character – exactly because of their

---

1 For this chapter, ideas have been used from Bimberg (1994); (1996b), Review of Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd. 1992, in *Kinder-und Jugendliteraturforschung 1995/96*, ed. by Hans-Heino Ewers *et al.*, Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 138-40; Binder (2014); (2018); (2020) and (2016b), *Childhood and Food in the Edwardian Period*, Saarbrücken: Südwestdeutscher Verlag für Hochschulschriften.

2 Cf. Binder 2014: ch. 2.

psychically consoling effects in current times of trouble. Just recall that it's often adults who read these books, continue to buy them or give them away to children as gifts. This is how ideas that belong to an obsolete discourse perpetuate themselves and continue to live an afterlife. Not infrequently this happens with classics. The remarkable quality about them is, however, that some of them also offered examples of a counter-discourse already at the time of their first appearance. This side-by-side of old and new is particularly intriguing and appealing to different readerships. On the other hand, we can find obsolete and romanticized notions even in new books published for the first time. Because they form a link with the past and with books that have been successful for a long time already it may be thought that this is a factor guaranteeing success with current reading audiences – not only children, but also adults.

Today, however, we are all living in a time when childhood is a concept that is more ambiguous and disturbing than ever. On the one hand, childhood is prolonged (with “children” staying with their parents for various reasons well into their end-twenties or early thirties). On the other, it is shortened (with children wanting to and actually participating in adult life and adult culture ever earlier). Hollindale noted a similar trend in society and in literature at the end of the 1990s:

One effect has been to generate a body of texts which belongs to ‘children’s literature’ but is only marginally distinguishable from the adult novel. [...] The postmodern novel is firmly established in this sub-genre, and novels such as the American Robert Cormier’s *I Am the Cheese*, the Australian Gary Crew’s *Strange Objects*, and the British Peter Dickinson’s *AK*, explore important political, historical and racial themes through challenging modes of narrative organisation. They address a public of young readers which has been profoundly changed by social, economic and biological developments over recent decades – one for which puberty occurs earlier and earlier, education and the labour market mean that adolescence is socially prolonged, and media influences play a powerful role in shortening childhood. Children’s literature has therefore become a register and textual site of revolution in the phenomenon of childhood, one which destabilises our conventional notions of maturation and of what we might mean by ‘child’ (Hollindale 1998: 42).