
On Juvenile Tastes

Not long ago I saw in some periodical the statement that 'Children are a distinct race'. Something like this seems to be assumed today by many who write, and still more who criticise, what are called children's books or 'juveniles'. Children are regarded as being at any rate a distinct *literary* species, and the production of books that cater for their supposedly odd and alien taste has become an industry; almost a heavy one.

This theory does not seem to me to be borne out by the facts. For one thing, there is no literary taste common to all children. We find among them all the same types as among ourselves. Many of them, like many of us, never read when they can find any other entertainment. Some of them choose quiet, realistic, 'slice-of-life' books (say, *The Daisy Chain*), as some of us choose Trollope.

Some like fantasies and marvels, as some of us like the *Odyssey*, Boiardo, Ariosto, Spenser, or Mr Mervyn Peake. Some care for little but books of information, and so do some adults. Some of them, like some of us, are omnivorous. Silly children prefer success stories about school life as silly adults like success stories about grown-up life.

We can approach the matter in a different way by drawing up a list of books which, I am told, have been generally liked by the young. I suppose Aesop, *The Arabian Nights*, *Gulliver*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, *Peter Rabbit*, and *The Wind in the Willows* would be a reasonable choice. Only the last three were written for

children, and those three are read with pleasure by many adults. I, who disliked *The Arabian Nights* as a child, dislike them still.

It may be argued against this that the enjoyment by children of some books intended for their elders does not in the least refute the doctrine that there is a specifically childish taste. They select (you may say) that minority of ordinary books which happens to suit them, as a foreigner in England may select those English dishes which come nearest to suiting his alien palate. And the specifically childish taste has been generally held to be that for the adventurous and the marvellous.

Now this, you may notice, implies that we are regarding as specifically childish a taste which in many, perhaps in most, times and places has been that of the whole human race. Those stories from Greek or Norse mythology, from Homer, from Spenser, or from folklore which children (but by no means all children) read with delight were once the delight of everyone.

Even the fairy tale *proprement dit* was not originally intended for children; it was told and enjoyed in (of all places) the court of Louis XIV. As Professor Tolkien has pointed out, it gravitated to the nursery when it went out of fashion among the grown-ups, just as old-fashioned furniture gravitated to the nursery. Even if all children and no adults now liked the marvellous—and neither is the case—we ought not to say that the peculiarity of children lies in their liking it. The peculiarity is that they *still* like it, even in the twentieth century.

It does not seem to me useful to say, 'What delighted the infancy of the species naturally still delights the infancy of the individual'. This involves a parallel between individual and species which we are in no position to draw. What age is Man? Is the race now in its childhood, its maturity, or its dotage? As we don't know at all exactly when it began, and have no notion when it will end, this seems a nonsense question. And who knows if it will ever be mature? Man may be killed in infancy.

Surely it would be less arrogant, and truer to the evidence, to say that the peculiarity of child readers is that they are not peculiar. It is we who are peculiar. Fashions in literary taste come and go among the adults, and every period has its own shibboleths. These, when good, do not improve the taste of children,

and, when bad, do not corrupt it; for children read only to enjoy. Of course their limited vocabulary and general ignorance make some books unintelligible to them. But apart from that, juvenile taste is simply human taste, going on from age to age, silly with a universal silliness or wise with a universal wisdom, regardless of modes, movements, and literary revolutions.

This has one curious result. When the literary Establishment—the approved canon of taste—is so extremely jejune and narrow as it is today, much has to be addressed in the first instance to children if it is to get printed at all. Those who have a story to tell must appeal to the audience that still cares for storytelling.

The literary world of today is little interested in the narrative art as such; it is preoccupied with technical novelties and with 'ideas', by which it means not literary, but social or psychological, ideas. The ideas (in the literary sense) on which Miss Norton's *The Borrowers* or Mr White's *Mistress Masham's Response* are built would not need to be embodied in 'juveniles' at most periods.

It follows that there are now two very different sorts of 'writers for children'. The wrong sort believe that children are 'a distinct race'. They carefully 'make up' the tastes of these odd creatures—like an anthropologist observing the habits of a savage tribe—or even the tastes of a clearly defined age-group within a particular social class within the 'distinct race'. They dish up not what they like themselves but what that race is supposed to like. Educational and moral, as well as commercial, motives may come in.

The right sort work from the common, universally human, ground they share with the children, and indeed with countless adults. They label their books 'For Children' because children are the only market now recognised for the books they, anyway, want to write.