

## **Editorial: Curating National Literatures**

**Lucy Pearson, Karen Sands-O'Connor, Aishwarya Subramanian**

The intersection between the child, children's literature and the nation has been a recurrent concern for children's literature scholars. Yael Darr notes that children's culture frequently takes on an important role in nation building, where 'intensive canonisation of children's literature serves to construct the national child culture and its past' ('Nation Building', 24). Darr, Helle Strandgaard Jensen, Maria Truglio and Hazel Sheeky-Bird are among many scholars who have recently explored how national identity has been negotiated in children's literature of different nations.

This special issue grew out of a symposium held in 2017 at Seven Stories: the National Centre for Children's Books in the UK on the theme 'Diverse Voices? Curating a National History of Children's Books'. Questions of curation were central to the symposium because Seven Stories, as an archive and museum of children's literature, is actively engaged in collecting and curating. We chose to preserve this concept here, in order to draw attention to the multiple processes that serve to construct both national literatures and the child within them. The question of what is preserved, promoted and admitted into the collective memory is central to nation building. Kimberley Reynolds has demonstrated that 'holes in the cultural memory' (38) are not produced only in the context of trauma or in the process of building a new nation, but can also fundamentally shape the construction of national histories in established nations such as the UK.

Children's literature, as part of the heritage industry, has a role to play in defining any given nation. Yet if certain texts 'define' a nation, others are left out, ignored or even aggressively silenced. Sadia Habib argues that nationalism is often a kind of "narcissism" that obsesses over size and shape through boundaries and borders, as well as about the inner and exterior, through ideas of racial purity and prestige' (84). Many of the articles in this special issue record this national narcissism based on racial or ethnic purity (often exacerbated by a nation's colonial and imperial past). But children's literature, as with other heritage industries, has the potential to change conversations about nation and, as Viv Golding suggests, 'help to construct new ideas of ourselves as a nation by mediating the claims to the representation of diverse groups' (32). This potential, however, requires a shift in power hierarchies. This issue's articles show how power shifts take place, whether through a valuing of minority ethnic voices, or children's voices, or oral and folkloric traditions.

Our cover image represents part of a graphic record of the 'Diverse Voices?' symposium created by Dr Pen Mendonca, whose methods of graphic facilitation preserve conversations and enable participants to 'curate' the record as it is produced, responding to the work-in-progress. This attempt at active preservation was appropriate for an event that aimed to consider how Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) voices are reflected in the UK's national histories of children's books; as the graphic record demonstrates, this conversation explored both the prevalence of 'holes in the cultural memory' when it comes to BAME Britons and the potential for the archive to repair some of these holes.

The two special features in this issue focus on different ways of filling the holes in cultural memory. In the 'Research in Action' piece for this number, Amy Cross, Cherie Allan and Kerry Kilner address the role of digital humanities in this process, demonstrating how tools available in the bibliographic database AustLit have enabled new approaches to collection and curation, making space in Australia's national literature for minority and repressed voices and allowing the curation of indigenous traditions such as oral narrative. This issue also launches a new special feature on African literature: Olusanmi Babarinde and Elizabeth Babarinde draw attention to the importance of oral culture as a part of national children's literature, considering the significance of lullabies as a part of Yoruban culture.

Pearson, L., Sands O'Connor, K and Subramanian, A. 'Editorial: Curating National Literatures', *International Research in Children's Literature* 12:1 (2019), v-vii.

Many of the remaining articles in the issue examine attempts to shape national literatures by intervening in a country's canonical or popular traditions. Chengcheng You shows how shifts in national identity intersect with negotiations of multimodal narratives, demonstrating an evolving aesthetic and political renegotiation of the Monkey King figure from classical Chinese culture. Stacy Creech argues that the inherent racism of the Dominican Republic's imperial history led to an emphasis on whiteness in the national children's literature, until educational reforms in 1993 initiated an increased presence of all of the island's ethnic groups in children's books. And in her article on the popular 1970s Turkish children's magazine *Milliyet Çocuk*, Deniz Arzuk shows how the need to maintain readership for the left-wing publication necessitated being increasingly open to children's own voices in the pages of the magazine.

The final two articles for this issue examine the role of educational and cultural institutions in curating national literatures, demonstrating the often-conflicting interplay between ideas of literary prestige and the educative and social functions of children's literature. Lauren Rea shows that in Argentina the education system has played an important role in curating a national children's literature. Moral and didactic stories by writers like Constancio C. Vigil were initially embraced in this context, but more recently, playful work by writers such as Horacio Quiroga has tended to displace didactic writing from the cultural record. Our own article also shows how ideas of literary prestige can produce holes in the cultural memory curated through children's literary awards. Focusing on curation of a national literature through the UK's Carnegie Medal, and contesting approaches embodied in other book prizes including the *Guardian* award and the politically conscious Other Award, we demonstrate that the UK's children's literary awards have typically curated a view of the nation as white, English and middle class.

Overall, the articles in this issue showcase problems of curating a national children's literature that adheres to strict boundaries, whether territorial, age-based, aesthetic, racial or ethnic. As national borders become sites of increasing contention, the most successful future for child readers around the globe may depend on more fluid boundaries in defining how children's literature belongs to and shapes a nation.

### Works Cited

- Darr, Yael. 'Nation Building and Children's Literary Canons: The Israeli Test Case'. *Canon Constitution and Canon Change in Children's Literature*. Eds Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Anja Müller. New York: Routledge, 2017. 23–38.
- . *The Nation and the Child: Nation Building in Hebrew Children's Literature, 1930–1970*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2018.
- Golding, Viv. *Learning at the Museum Frontiers: Identity, Race and Power*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Habib, Sadia. *Learning and Teaching British Values: Policies and Perspectives on British Identities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018.
- Reynolds, Kimberley. *Left Out: the Forgotten Radical Tradition in Children's Publishing in Britain, 1910-1949*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Sheeky-Bird, Hazel. *Class, Leisure and National Identity in British Children's Literature, 1918–1950*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Strandgaard-Jensen, Helle. 'Making Children's "Classics", Making Past Childhoods: Children's "Classics" as Sites for Memory Politics and Nostalgia'. *Reinventing Childhood Nostalgia: Books, Toys, and Contemporary Media Culture*. Ed. Elisabeth Wesseling. New York: Routledge, 2017. 104–21.
- Truglio, Maria. *Italian Children's Literature and National Identity: Childhood, Melancholy, Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 2017.