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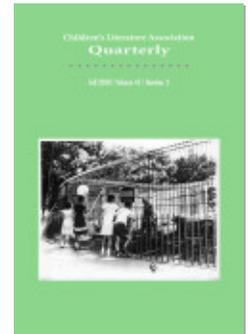
The ABC of It: Why Children's Books Matter by Leonard Marcus
(review)

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broad criticisms of the millennial generation and considers how members of that group have been impacted by political turmoil, standardized testing, and the prominence of social media. Considering these aspects, she argues that online fan culture has served as gateways for the Harry Potter generation to subversively educate themselves, create new content, and find new passions.

In the chapter “Harry Potter and the Male Student Athlete,” Morris notes that because athletes are often competitive, some “hate giving a poor performance of their abilities,” which they sometimes must do when it comes to reading (162). She suggests guiding them to “learn to appreciate reading through the context of play” (163). Much of the argument focuses upon the “culture of violence” that the Hogwarts students face in *Order of the Phoenix* and that athletes face in contact sports.

Valeo’s and Hammond and Pershing’s chapters focus on using the series within college classrooms. In “Lumens and Literature,” Valeo discusses using the series in an eight-week, 300-level, elective English course to encourage critical reading. She notes she did not allow spoilers in the discussion. This is a goal I have found impossible to meet during my own teaching of the series. Valeo also provides scholarly recommendations to share with undergraduate students. In “Harry Potter Changed My Life,” Hammond focuses more on cultural studies and mythology in her approach to the course. Her co-author and one of her former students who served as a prefect when teaching the course, Per-

shing introduces the perspectives of other students enrolled in the course and in the study abroad component to visit famed Harry Potter sites.

This collection does an excellent job of making connections among its different essays and providing a basis for further conversation on the personal impact the series has had upon generations of readers and upon the larger culture.

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***The ABC of It: Why Children’s Books Matter.* By Leonard Marcus. University of Minnesota Press, 2019.**

Reviewed by Zhang Shengzhen

A favorite childhood book can leave a lasting impression, but as adults we tend to shelve such memories. For fourteen months beginning in June 2013, more than half a million visitors to the New York Public Library viewed an exhibition about the role that children’s books play in world culture and in our lives. After the exhibition closed, attendees clamored for a catalog of *The ABC of It* as well as for exhibition curator and children’s literature historian Leonard Marcus’s insightful, wry commentary about the objects on display. Now with this

book, a collaboration between the University of Minnesota's Kerlan Collection and Marcus, the wide-ranging research and underlying vision of that exhibit can be experienced anywhere.

With Marcus's rigorous intellectual framework and insightful descriptions, this book explores the impact of children's literature on society over time and across cultures. More than 400 full-color images of original artwork and archival materials illustrate the text, which is divided into four parts: "Visions of Childhood," "Off the Shelf: Giving and Getting Books," "The Art of the Picture Book," and "Coda: From the Kerlan."

"Visions of Childhood" considers childhood as a cultural construct that has prompted the creation of not just one children's literature tradition, but many. Marcus argues that "behind every children's book is a vision of childhood: a shared understanding of what growing up is all about" (5). Concepts of childhood vary in fundamental ways from culture to culture and over time. The *New-England Primer*, first published in Boston around 1690, addressed the spiritual education of the children of the North American colonists who believed in original sin. The notion of the "Rational Child" developed by John Locke was a repudiation of the Puritans' vision. In the writings and artwork, spanning two centuries, of William Blake, Hans Christian Andersen, E. B. White, and Maurice Sendak, the child is a Romantic hero who perceives and at times also reveals the truth of life. The rise of developmental psychology inspired the vision of the "Progressive Child." Margaret

Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* and Crockett Johnson's *Harold and the Purple Crayon* put into practice this new psychological understanding of how children experience the world. A discussion of the "Citizen Child" considers the role of children's books as propaganda, nation-building tools, and ultimately as building blocks of cultural identity.

Part 2, "Off the Shelf: Giving and Getting Books," focuses on the kinds of books that children have traditionally gained access to via their adult gatekeepers, and certain kinds of reading material children have found on their own. During the nineteenth century, with the emergence in the West of a prosperous middle class, a vibrant market developed for holiday gift books characterized by literary merit and visual splendor. Children's free access to public libraries, which became near-universal in the US after 1900, opened a new chapter in the democratization of reading and literacy; pioneered in America, children's library service has been emulated internationally. Yet some of the most beloved children's books were not those that the librarians and other adult authorities championed. To the amazement—and horror—of the experts, it was Edward Stratemeyer, the turn-of-the-last-century American author and entrepreneur whose army of ghostwriters produced vast quantities of formulaic series fiction, who captured the hearts of America's young readers. In the 1930s, comic books proved to be equally popular and controversial: loved by children but regarded as crude and possibly dangerous by the adults. Considering

the extreme contrasts in the types of reading matter that adults and children have sometimes favored, it is not surprising that censorship, a topic that Marcus discusses in depth, became a persistent factor as American children's literature evolved and flourished.

"The Art of the Picture Book" features a selection of memorable illustrations and argues convincingly that underlying the seeming simplicity of picture books is a high degree of artistry. Marcus identifies Randolph Caldecott as the pivotal figure in the artform's invention, and makes a strong (and wholly original) case for seeing the picture book as a kind of proto-motion picture whose development coincided with the stop-action photographic experiments of Eadweard Muybridge and the advent of early moving-picture devices. Wanda Gág's *Millions of Cats* is highlighted as the picture book that marked a turning point in America's quest for cultural independence from Britain. Also explored is the impact of illustrated books on film and other pop cultural forms and media. Among the books referenced with regard to this theme are the *Alices*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *The Story of Ferdinand*, and *Harry Potter*. The explosion of interest in graphic novels is seen in the context not only of comics and picture book history but also of the artist's book and the global shift toward a more visual culture.

In the final section or "Coda," Lisa Von Drasek, the curator of the Kerlan Collection, offers an overview of the University of Minnesota Libraries' special collections, where "the major-

ity of the materials . . . are generously donated by the writers and artists for research and education" (211). Von Drasek shares Marcus's view that "children's literature is an art form that educates, entertains, challenges, and inspires" (211).

Also worth mentioning is the unique role played by the New York Public Library in the making of this book. "The ABC of It," which proved to be the most popular exhibition in the library's history, represented a continuation of that library's historic leadership role in the development of children's literature in the United States. "With missionary fervor for battling commercialism and enriching young lives, the NYPL's children's librarian Anne Carroll Moore issued annual Best Books lists, published her fiery opinions in the *New York Herald-Tribune*, cofounded Children's Book Week, and helped launch the Newbery and Caldecott Medals" (104). Moreover, Marcus views New York itself as a "storied city" that has long been a rich source of inspiration for authors and illustrators including Frances Hodgson Burnett, Ludwig Bemelmans, Langston Hughes, Robert McCloskey, Roald Dahl, Maurice Sendak, and Judy Blume, among many others (200).

In conclusion, Marcus has made an important contribution by documenting the relationship between changing ideas about childhood and the history and modern development of literature for young readers. He has demonstrated the power of illustration art to make reading a more immediate and meaningful experience. Marcus's own profound vision of the

history of children's books and childhood makes this an enlightening and inspirational book. The range and diversity of the material chosen is also impressive given the strengths of the Kerlan Collection's holdings, which are far less international in scope than the matchless treasure trove of the New York Public Library, which Marcus had made maximum use of for the show's original iteration. Nonetheless, included here are key examples from Europe, the Americas, and Asia, and from across more than two centuries. Marcus tracks deep connections between children's

books and society, regarding children's literature as both a rich repository of collective memory and an engine of cultural change. This book will be of great value to all the shapers and researchers of children's literature and to general readers as well.

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