CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

A brief history of children’s literature
17TH CENTURY

The Concept of Childhood
From small adults to children

- Before the 17th century, children were seen as small adults: this view began to shift towards the end of the 17th century as John Locke developed a new theory in Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693). According to the philosopher, children could acquire knowledge through experience because they were a « blank slate » (littéralement une « ardoise vide », une « page blanche » en français).

- During the Enlightenment (les Lumières) and Romantic periods, childhood started to be viewed as a time of innocence, distinct from adolescence and adulthood.
The beginning of children’s literature can thus be traced back to the 17th century. At that time, children’s books were mainly didactic: they had to teach them values and shape their behavior.

John Newbery (1713-1767), a British publisher, is said to be the « Father of Children’s Literature ». He published A Little Pretty Pocket-Book, his first children’s book, in 1744. About one-fifth of the books he published were children's stories.
19TH CENTURY

The Blossoming of Children's Literature
Fairy Tales

◦ Before the 19th century, fairy tales were not meant for children, they were even seen as inappropriate for kids. Fairy tales were fashionable among adults in the French court at the end of the 17th century (Charles PERRAULT published his fairy tales at that time).

◦ When Jacob and Wilhelm GRIMM published their two-volume collection Kinderund Hausmärchen (1812–1815) in Germany, things started to change.

◦ Edgar TAYLOR translated the tales into English as German Popular Stories (1823–1826) and revised and redirected the tales for children.

◦ Fairy tales became very popular after the publication of Hans Christian ANDERSEN’s Tales, told for children (1848 in English), and many authors tried to replicate the fairy tale style.
A Golden Age

◦ The **Victorian era** (1837-1907), corresponding to the reign of Queen Victoria in England) is seen as a golden age for children’s literature.

◦ **Lewis CARROLL's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland** (1865) was very popular during that period. It is believed that children’s literature started to shift from instruction to delight with this novel, although it is not the sole cause.

◦ Children’s books then represented the **separate spheres for men and women** (typical of the era): some books were clearly aimed at boys, others at girls.
A Golden Age

- Stories for girls were often **domestic** and celebrated the **family life:**
  - Louisa May ALCOTT’s *Little Women* (Les Quatres filles du Dr. March) (1868)
  - Charlotte YONGE’s *The Daisy Chain* (1856)

- Stories for boys encouraged them **to have adventures:**
  - *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark TWAIN (1876) and its sequel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)
  - Robert Louis STEVENSON’s *Treasure Island* (1883)
  - Rudyard KIPLING’s *Kim* (1901)

- There were also animal tales, such as Anna SEWELL's *Black Beauty* (1877) and KIPLING's *The Jungle Book* (1894), which delighted both girls and boys.
A Golden Age

◦ Children’s literature truly blossomed in the second half of the 19th century: books were mass produced and more and more children could read.

◦ Children’s literature began to adapt to the social classes the young readers belonged to: penny dreadfuls for working-class kids, high-minded literature for children of the middle and upper classes.

◦ Books were highly illustrated in the 19th century, and picture books slowly started to appear as the printing methods evolved.
20TH CENTURY

Picture Books and Series Books
The rise of picture books

○ In the 20th century, children’s books began to be written for distinct readerships: children were now divided into different categories according to their age.

○ The shapes of the books also changed: pop-up books, shaped books, and tactile books became widely popular.

Dorothy KUNHARDT, Pat the Bunny
Series books

- **Series books** became popular in the 20th century, even though it was frowned upon by the critics:
  - L. Frank BAUM's Oz series, begun with *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900)
  - Lucy Maud MONTGOMERY’s Anne series, which started with *Anne of Green Gables* (1908)
  - Laura INGALLS WILDER's Little House series (1st book = *Little House in the Big Woods* in 1932)
  - C. S. LEWIS’s Chronicles of Narnia (1950–1956), which started with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950)
  - Anne MARTIN's Baby-Sitters Club series, begun with *Kristy's Great Idea* (1986)
  - R. L. STINE's Goosebumps (Chair de Poule) series, begun with *Welcome to the Dead House* (1992)
  - The *Nancy Drew* (Alice en français) series by fictitious and collective author Carolyn KEENE from 1930 to 2003.
Resources
Articles

- « Children's Literature »
- “A Brief History of Children's Literature”
- « Children's literature » (Britannica)
- « Children's Literature » (Internet FAQ Archives)
Videos

- Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction
- Children's Literature | The Very Short Introductions Podcast
- Genres of Children's Literature
- What is unique about children’s literature?