What’s the “Golden Age” of children’s literature?
The melding of two ages and cultures—the Romantics and Victorians—created a push and pull between treatment of children as immorals adults and a belief that children should flourish in a creative environment. The literature born from this transition is unparalleled in its combination of the structured and the chaotic, with the choice example being Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.

BEFORE...
➢ stories were “didactic,” or focused on morality and religion
➢ books were unimaginative and used to instruct children away from any improper behavior
➢ kids were treated like miniature grownups (which we all know is not a very useful strategy!)

...AFTER
There was “a dawning sense of childhood as a special state, as not just a period of training for adulthood but a stage of life of value in its own right” (Wulfschläger 13).
➢ childhood became a time of irreplaceable innocence
➢ less religious themes—stories shifted to adventure and fantasy
➢ adults protected the simplicity of childhood in a world that was quickly changing

Works Cited


This tells us...
For the BRITISH, there was a strong push to be more imaginative, but the impact of the World Wars simultaneously created a need for societal structure. What resulted in the literature is a sense of nostalgia for a simplistic past/childhood innocence, balanced with carefully constructed rules.

So... why does it matter?
The impact that cultural and social norms from a specific time period have on works of literature is unmistakable. For example:
➢ Without World War II, J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic Lord of the Rings trilogy would never have formed into the success that it is today.
➢ African American characters were introduced to the series Dick and Jane as a direct result of social movements in the 1960s.

AMERICAN values, on the other hand, were focused on forming and solidifying an identity—the split from Britain gave the U.S. the chance to explore new possibilities; the children’s novels reflect the “growing up” America had to do as a nation.

EVENT IMPACTS SOCIETY (IE: STALIN ERA IN SOVIET UNION)

AMERICAN CHILDS (EVENTUALLY) CHANGE SOCIETY

KIDS READ TEXT, BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND PAST ISSUES

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By Kayla Overbey

“All writers start with a layer of truth, don’t they? If not, their stories would be nothing but spoils of cotton candy, a fleeting taste wrapped around nothing but air.”

BRITISH

➢ Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) by Lewis Carroll
  • Carroll (aka Charles Dodgson) was raised in a creative environment, but struggled to adapt to Victorian propriety—tried constantly to return to childhood
  • Alice reflects Dodgson’s feelings toward rules—her journey is full of talking animals, an infamous tea party, bouts of random growth, and a very odd order of croquet
  • Alice also disapproves of the chaos—she declares the Mad Hatter’s tea party to be “the stupidest tea-party I ever was at in all my life!”

➢ Mary Poppins (1934) by P.L. Travers
  • written between World War I and II, when England lacked societal structure, was physically in ruins, and its citizens craved simpler times
  • Mary Poppins is organized societal regime—she is timely, strict, and authoritative
  • her obsession with order and control is balanced by the fantastic scenarios she introduces to the children—“I’m afraid we can’t stay, Mary Poppins broke in.
  • “We’re on our way round the world”

AMERICAN

➢ Little House on the Prairie (1935) by Laura Ingalls Wilder
  • published during the Great Depression—connects to the nation moving and adapting to unfamiliar circumstances
  • based on true events of Wilder family’s pioneering ventures into the American Midwest; takes place in Kansas during the late 1800s—Western expansion
  • family faces danger and political problems, but fights to lay down a “homestead”—what could be interpreted as finding a greater American identity

➢ The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) by Mark Twain
  • 1876 was the American centennial and brought monumental changes to the U.S.—brought the nation into its “adulthood”
  • portrayal and death of character Injun Joe is connected to the beginning of the end of the Indian Wars, which lasted for two centuries
  • Tom and Huck, though mischievous, confront real danger—they portray a precarious balance between childhood and adulthood

“*The Storyteller, Jodi Picoult