



# Children's Literature (Readers' Guide to Essential Criticism)

Books Reviewed:

[Children's Literature \(Readers' Guide to Essential Criticism\)](#) [1]

Issue:

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Reviewer:

[Brian Alderson](#) [3]

Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Being an online journal, **Books for Keeps** can have no reliable record of its readership. Presumably it includes people from all walks of life who have a strong or a passing interest in children's literature, so that a dauntingly-titled **Guide to Essential Criticism** by a senior Research Fellow at Roehampton University presents problems for the magazine's reviewer. Indeed, Pinsent admits at the start that 'children's literature studies have been dominated by what might be termed 'theory people' and that her book points such readers (how many **BfK** ones?) towards 'some of the most significant critical writing of the present period'.

What she does not say however, and what may be of significance to all readers of this journal, is how her pointing can possibly be accomplished in a volume of 189 text pages plus 13 pages of Notes. If her contention holds, that the arrival of theorists has brought children's literature into the academy to be treated on a par with adult literature then surely her publisher should have treated the subject's 'essential criticism' on a similar par with what occurs in the rest of the series. (I notice that **Tom Sawyer** is the subject of a single silly remark on page 135 of the present book while **Tom Sawyer & Huckleberry Finn** are given a whole volume to themselves elsewhere in the series, but no other children's books or writers thereof are present. Memories are aroused of old Francelia Butler in the 'Editor's High Chair' complaining about 'the great excluded'.)

Regular readers of **BfK** will know its extraordinarily comprehensive structure ? in the last issue for instance: Windows on Illustration; the regular Authorgraph; the long-term coverage of children's own responses to books; a sustained attention to Awards (including attention to translation ? which seems a popular subject down Roehampton way); reviews of 66 current books and minor aspects as well. All these feed into over 200 previous issues of like coverage which comprise a whole history of contemporary publishing for children which must amount to a huge ground-base for contemporary criticism. (For earlier decades one could say the same for the reviews and discussions in Margery Fisher's **Growing Point** and the sustained brilliance of the commentaries in Nancy Chambers's **Signal**.) But, alas, it seems that this immense resource receives hardly a peep from the Research Fellow even though the well-indexed **BfK** is freely available on-line, and **Signal** has a 159 page classified guide ? not in Pinsent's list of sources). I suppose they did not

deal sufficiently in chronotopes or schema poetics.

Since the **Guide** is obviously for students, Pinsent's book exhibits a tremendous amount of reading on her part (a typical single page, chosen here at random, contains ten diverse references to works on 'Visual Texts'<sup>1</sup>) and she also has a gift for deftly summarising the contents of the many works that come under her peers in the academic trade). How many institutions in Britain run courses on Children's Literature? What is the level of reading knowledge of the students at the start of their courses (they may not have read any children's books since they were themselves children)? What are the curricula within which their learning takes place and how do the students cope with Pinsent's multiple, perhaps obscure, references? Her treatment of children's book historiography is profoundly defective, and her section on Genres leaves out such matters (deserving of critical theory?) as adventure stories, animal stories, school stories, pony stories etc, etc, to say nothing of the multiple genres within the picture-book field, including, say, alphabet books and movables. She pays no tribute to that almost vanished tribe of children's librarians who long preceded university teachers in research activities. Nothing is said on either bibliographical research or the growing field of manuscript studies (the yield from many major research libraries around the world is not mentioned). If this is the level at which children's books are celebrated in the academy, **BfK** all on its own has a great deal more to offer ? and all for free.

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[4][<sup>1</sup>] [5] I notice however, that, in isolating what she believes to be two 'significant contributions', she fails to mention much more significant ones by Quentin Blake and Barbara Bader

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