



Reading & Rebellion. An Anthology of Radical Writing for Children 1900-1960

Books Reviewed:

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New to Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

Packed with unfamiliar material from and about authors stretching from the well-known to the totally obscure, this anthology breathes new life into a branch of British children's literature too long overlooked or simply ignored. Often barely accessible to all but the most determined researchers, the overall picture it reveals can now stand on more equal terms with those better preserved authors and titles from the past that chose to stay within a basically more establishment view of children, their parents and their country.

Contents include stories, chapters or illustrations advocating socialism, pacifism, fighting fascism and praise of the Soviet Union to discussions of modern architecture, sexual development and the impact of the new sciences. Much of this now seems hugely dated, but it is still moving to witness the courage and commitment of these contributors and their publishers when it came to raising topics often considered deeply unsuitable at the time. No particular classic emerges from these forgotten texts, and their recurring belief in the possibility of achieving a brave new world in the near future no longer fits the popular mood today. But as the editors point out, much that was being advocated in once obscure journals is now taken for granted.

In her excellent introduction, Polly Toynbee makes the point that all literature for children over the ages has often tended at least initially to side with the poor and oppressed. But while traditional tales have Cinderella or Dick Whittington happily joining forces with the rich and powerful in their final pages, left-wing authors usually felt unable to fulfil this particular dream of social mobility up and away from a character's straitened beginnings. Instead they offered a more essentially moral view of how to live, with comforts for main characters drawn not from newly acquired wealth or social elevation but from solidarity with kindred spirits living in the same environment which they are all trying to improve. A worthy message, certainly, and when backed up by consenting parents at the time one that sometimes had a lasting impact, arguably even on numbers of future politicians and legislators.

Older readers of this fascinating anthology may well experience the odd nostalgic stab when an otherwise long-forgotten title hoves into view. In 1977 the late teacher turned writer Bob Dixon wrote **Catching Them Young**, a pioneering two volume study of right-wing bias in past children's books plus a look at current authors now taking a different line. How

he would have enjoyed this newest entry into the debate!

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