

South African Children's Literature – A Brief Survey

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Abstract

South African children's literature reflects not only the dreams of the native people and the colonial impact but the picture of the present day social, political and economic structure in the society. South African children's literature is present since the first half of the nineteenth century in written form but oral literature was present since long back. Still serious research in this field was conducted during the middle of the twentieth century. South African Children's Literature has a rich history. In South African Children's Literature religion and politics takes predominant place. This brief report is to know about the history of South African Children's Literature and its precursors. Their contribution to its area though journals and conferences. Finally it is clear that after a long struggle its existence has been proved. So, an attempt to discuss the elements of South African Children's Literature shall be made in the days to come.

KEYWORDS: South Africa, Children's literature, Contribution.

As religion plays a major role in the history of South African children's literature, it begins with a few religious works for children in the early nineteenth century in South Africa. But early adventure stories for children and works giving information regarding South Africa were published abroad by English writers. The first novel about South Africa was *The English Boy at the Cape* by Edward Kendall (1841) then Fredrick Marryat's *The mission* (1845). Gradually translations were done to English and some from English to African. Later South Africa was concerned about children's literature and started documenting what existed and developed a strong tradition of bibliography with general books, adventures, best writers and illustrators.

Two undergraduate students in librarianship produced what remain the major annotated bibliographies of South African English-language children's books (fiction and nonfiction of the first half of the twentieth century: P.J. Stanton at the University of Cape Town (1946) and M. Sewitz at the University of the Witwatersrand (1965). Sewitz, in particular, scoured every source available. While the majority of the books they listed were published in South Africa, they also included books set in South Africa but published overseas. (Jenkins:2008)

Jay Heale was publishing English Language Children's books till 1964 and later became an independent Children's books specialist. In 1985 he published his Young Africa Booklist of fiction and nonfiction, an annotated bibliography with his own recommendations. He continued this for the next ten years with the annual publication SACBIP: *All South African Children's Books* in print, which listed separately English-Afrikaans-, and African-language titles, with an author index, honor lists, lists of publishers, and publishing statistics. Next his notable booklet is *From the Bushveld to Biko: The Growth of South African Children's Literature in English from 1907 to 1992* Trance Through 110 notable books (1996). Similar to Heal's earlier *Young African Booklist*, in 1992 Shirley Davies published a guide for teachers, *Reading round about: A Review of South African Children's Literature*.

Afrikaans Children's Literature is well documented at Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, C.A. Lohann established the Institute for Research in [Afrikaans] Children's Literature where Elsabe Steenberg instituted the first postgraduate course in Children's Literature in South Africa and published "AKG"(Afrikaanse Kinderboek gids), and a full-length book, *kinder lektuer* ("children's literature").

Further documentation followed when J.A.Kruger of the University of South Africa in Pretoria published *Kinderkeur* (children's choice'), a book on all the winners of children's book awards (including books in English). He included reviews of the books taken from a large range of sources as well as evaluative biographies of the writers and illustrators and lists of their works. Recording the names of the winners of prizes has long been an interest of researchers. The country has many prizes for children's literature, going back to the establishment of the Scheepers Prize for [Afrikaans] Youth Literature in 1956 by the Suid Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (South African Academy for Science and Arts). (Jenkins:2008)

Only one general survey of children's literature in African languages had been produced: a dissertation presented at the University of the Western Cape by A.A. Mahoommed on "An Evaluation of the Nature and State of Published Children's Literature in Indigenous Languages in South Africa" (2001), which is recent enough to still be applicable to the current situation. Black researchers have written a number of theses (in English) on specific topics in African-language children's literature. (Jenkins:2008)

The South African National Gallery held an exhibition of illustrated children's books in 1986, *Doer-Land-Y/Far Far Away*, which was accompanied by a bilingual catalog containing authoritative essays in both English and Afrikaans (Holscher). Both Jay Heale (South African Authors and Illustrators) and H.E.van Zyland and M.M.Botes have contributed for biographies of important illustrators and list of their works, and the biographies in Wybenga and Snyman's Afrikaans text.

Related to Journals, *Literator* and *Musaion* are two academic journals and another one is *South African Journal of African Languages, English in African, Current Writing, and scrutiny 2*. As the spear of South African community gained the international representation since 1990, overseas interest in its children's literature and discussed the topics related to South Africa as The Lion and the Unicorn, Sankofa, Children's Literature Association Quarterly, and H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online in the United States; Canadian Children's Literature; Children's Literature in Education in the United Kingdom; *CREARTA and Paper* in Australia and internationally, *Book-bird*.

Conferences which added more information and gave recognition to this Literature, conference entitled "Towards Understanding" was held in Cape Town in 1987; the sequel of "Towards More Understanding" was held in 1992. Plenty of international participants came together by 1995 at a large conference organized by Thomas Van der Walt and his Children's Literature Research Unit at the University of South Africa. With this South Africa was capable of organizing two more conferences in the country: the International Research society for Children's Literature in 2001 (convened by Thomas Van der Walt) and the International Board on Books for Young People in 2004 (convened by Jay Heale).

Studies were made in the area of Race, Apartheid and Ethnocentric. Many South African researchers worked on non-African topics also. Later Children literature was studied with Adult Literature, as many topics were discussed based on history, colonialism, racism, nature, adventures, African flora and fauna, Language varieties and also classroom texts.

Gradually the research on South African children's literature gained the international recognition; many other country researchers took fairy tales, folktales, mythology and fantasy stories of South Africa for discussion. They were analyzed, compared, and contrasted. Studies giving new insights in this field are increasing, as this literature is raised to international level for discussion and as it is recognized explorations can be done related to postapartheid fiction. By reading and exploring the South African Literature in a way one can bring South Africa with the rest of the African continent and the world.

Children's Literature of English speaking South Africans:

The first half of the twentieth century saw the rise of South African children's literature in English and Afrikaans written by local authors and published in the country. Very little had been published locally until after the Anglo-Boer War ended in 1902. The English-speakers had arrived in two waves of organized immigration, in 1820 and 1848-51, and towards the end of the nineteenth century many more immigrants arrived to work in the diamond and gold mines. Until the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, they still considered themselves British rather than colonials with a separate culture; but a new sense of national identity among whites came with Union, and white English-speakers proceeded to develop a kind of literature for young white readers that drew on their European heritage but was set in their own country. (Jenkins:2002)

According to Elwyn Jenkins, in the next fifty years, successive political, legislative and constitutional steps marked the increasing independence of the nation, with the growth of white political power at the expense of a disempowered black underclass. In 1910 they numbered 506,000, which doubled by 1951; but they were always largely outnumbered by Afrikaans-speaking whites, and together with them constituted a small minority of the total population.

But the Second World War brought the white nation's rule to an end. In this period few Africans were not interested in getting involved in this struggle still many other joined with their countrymen to form the force, as a result of this "the ex-servicemen returned home, the colonial era was at an end: the cities became the melting-pot for white culture, and the National Party took power in 1948, setting course for the declaration of the independent Republic of South Africa in 1961". (Jenkins:2002)

English South African Children's Literature is based on indigenous culture, in 1950 fantasy literature for young children revealed the experience of the confusion and tension raised in the society due to metropolitan and colonial influence.

Contemporary children's books:

Since the 1960s, many books for children and young teenagers have made modern concerns in conservation the focus of the plots. The long tradition, in both indigenous folktales and stories by white writers, of anthropomorphizing flowers, birds, insects and animals (especially small creatures) has ensured that in contemporary children's books the emphasis is not so much on the

“flagship animals” – the “Big Five” – as on the worth of all fauna and flora. Stories of children versus crooks have them battling white, not black, poachers, who poach for money – their target more likely nowadays to be crayfish (Brain, 1997) than elephants – and who steal protected plants (Kühne, 1987; Prettejohn, 1986). Children tackle officialdom that threatens areas of natural importance (Younghusband, 1987) and corporations that dump toxic waste (Briner, 2000). Fantasy stories such as Witch woman on the Hogsback (Parker, 1987) have children fighting forces of evil that threaten the environment. Many stories, most notably by Pieter Grobbelaar, Cicely van Straten and Marguerite Poland, and picture books such as The king who loved birds (Pinnock, 1992) have been produced in the style of Literator, English South African children’s literature and the environment indigenous folktales. The insistence, in folktales and their imitations, on harmony in nature and between humans and nature, has led to stories pointing simple lessons about littering (Grobbelaar, 1984), chopping down trees (Brown, 1989) and similar behavior. Stories featuring the disappearance of the San and the Khoi (McAdorey, 1992; Slingsby, 1996; 2002) not only portray them as natural environmentalists, but draw lessons about genocide. (Jenkins:2004)

Though for years South Africa might be thought to produce only white-written books for white children, this has not been totally true. The English-speaking white population has been among the most liberal thinking in that country, and many fine books with a genuine African setting have been published there. For example, the percentage of children’s fiction with a black central character in recent years has been as follows in 1990:43 percent, 1991:49 percent, 1992:53 percent, with a marked increase of black authors writing for children (Heale 1993:12). In the latter field are such acknowledged names as Es’kia Mphahlele (for example, Father come Home (1984)) and Njabulo Ndabele (for example, Bonolo and the Peach Tree (1992)). Many South African authors and illustrators have had children’s books published internationally, including Niki Daly, Marguerite Poland, Paddy Bouma, Lesley Beake and Maretha Maartens. (Hunt)

This is a brief survey to know about the history of South African Children’s Literature and its precursors. Their contribution to its area through journals and conferences. Finally it is clear that after a long struggle its existence has been proved. An attempt to discuss the elements of South African Children’s Literature shall be made in the days to come.

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