

# 20TH CENTURY

The period between the two world wars saw the emergence of some of the most notable fantasy figures in children's literature, which may reflect the need for escape felt by the adult writers in the wake of the devastation of the First World War. Most of the great fantasies of this period were British.

Hugh Lofting's *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1920), about a physician who talks with animals, was the first in a series. The Doctor Dolittle stories are highly imaginative, and the later books in the series seem to improve over the earlier—something almost unheard of in series writing. Although the earlier books have been cited for racial insensitivity, Lofting's works generally promote admirable ideals, including pacifism, love for animals, and general tolerance.

A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) has become a cultural phenomenon with its appealing cast of anthropomorphic toy animals engaging in adventures under the watchful eye of the young Christopher Robin (Milne's own son). The work seems intended for the very young, although much of the humor in this book and its sequel, *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928), speaks as readily to adults as to children, which may account for its lasting appeal and for the keen interest shown by literary critics.

A work of some controversy was P. L. Travers's *Mary Poppins* (1934), a collection of wildly fanciful stories about an eccentric nanny. The acerbic character of the outrageous nursemaid has raised many an adult eyebrow, and, indeed, her nature was dramatically altered in the 1964 Disney movie—which, as with *The Wizard of Oz*, some consider an improvement over the book. In fact, the film and the book are two quite different creations.

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit; or, There and Back Again* (1937) is the prequel to his great trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, a fantasy for adults. But *The Hobbit* is quite suitable for children with its lovable, self-deprecating hero, Bilbo Baggins. The story is high fantasy, featuring dramatic battles, fanciful creatures, very real dangers, and just a touch of humor. Tolkien's work achieved cult status in the 1970s and certainly must be accounted one of the great fantasy works. The recent filming of the trilogy has ensured fans for another generation.

Perhaps the best-known American writer between the wars was Laura Ingalls Wilder, whose *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932) began a series of nine books based on her childhood and young adult experiences on the American frontier in the later years of the nineteenth century. This combination of domestic story with frontier adventure proved the perfect formula for one of the most successful publishing ventures of the era. Carol Ryrie Brink's *Caddie Woodlawn* (1935) is, in the Wilder vein, also a frontier/family story. And Eleanor Estes's *The Moffats* (1941), the first of a series, was a family tale set at the time of the First World War. In all cases, the family is viewed as an anchor and source of strength, a perspective that would change by the end of the century.

Also during this period, the United States excelled in the publication of picture books, beginning with Wanda Gág's acclaimed *Millions of Cats* (1928), a charming, yet earthy work with folktale qualities that is still in print. Other luminaries included Marjorie Flack (*The Story About Ping*, 1933), Munro Leaf (illustrating Richard Lawson's *The Story of Ferdinand*, 1936, among others), Ludwig Bemelmans (*Madeline*, 1939), and Dr. Seuss (*And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, 1937, and a host of rollicking books spanning five decades).

In fantasy, a number of series have appeared in the past fifty years that have remained favorites of children. These include the controversial works of Christian allegory, C. S. Lewis's Narnia chronicles (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1950, and sequels); Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1952) and sequels; Lucy Boston's Green Knowe series (*The Children of Green Knowe*, 1954), and sequels; Lloyd Alexander's Prydain chronicles (*The Book of Three*, 1965, and sequels); and Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea cycle (beginning with *A Wizard of Earthsea*, 1967). We would be remiss not to mention E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1956), and Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* (1975), all of which have been accorded status as modern fantasy classics. Most famous of all is, of course, J. K. Rowling, whose Harry Potter series (beginning with *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, 1998) has been nothing short of a publishing phenomenon in the wild enthusiasm it has spawned. And Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) reveals just how penetrating—and chilling—children's fantasy can be. The salient feature of children's fantasy since World War II is its focus on real children (animal and toy characters, although still found, especially in books for the very young, are relatively rare). Modern fantasy does not have the romantic and escapist quality found in much of the fantasy written between the two world wars.

Similarly, in realistic fiction, the trend has been toward greater realism in children's books. The family story has been perpetuated by such writers as Beverly Cleary (her Ramona books have been immensely popular), but for the most part it has given way to a less romanticized vision of the family. And writers such as Judy Blume helped to introduce the so-called *problem novel*, which focuses on some crisis of childhood or adolescence. The other notable trend in modern realism is what has come to be known as the *new realism*, characterized by a franker and more open approach to subjects once thought taboo in children's books: sexuality, violence, drugs, war, and so on. It was perhaps J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), a book for adolescents rather than children, that signaled the trend toward greater realism, harsher language, and a willingness to face head-on the problems of growing up. African-American writers such as Virginia Hamilton, Mildred Taylor, and Walter Dean Myers have sought to correct the cultural disparity that once prevailed in children's literature—through the 1950s it was virtually impossible to find a children's book that included any but very white children. The disparity is still apparent, but at least it is now possible to find books about African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and a wide variety of world cultures—all written for children.