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The Bottle Imp

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Tell Us A Story ...

For this issue, *The Bottle Imp* pokes its nose into the world of children's literature – that strange country where every work is in translation. This is disputed territory: children's reading pours from off the page straight into developing brains, forming pictures, scenes, ideas ... Scotland's books are no strangers to controversy in this field, from accusations of racism directed at Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* to accusations of Satanism aimed at J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* books. There are other forms of censors, too: we shall find one peculiar to this corner of the world, planted not in a pulpit but instead behind the eyes, lodged within the heads of Scotland's children.

Definitions of what constitutes "children's literature" will vary from time to time and place to place – to say nothing of from child to child. Some children may devour great bricks of printed text, while others balk at anything that's not a comic-strip. Literary worth, or any abstract merit, is not something you can weigh out by the kilo. As any child will no doubt tell you. In any case, a book you can't put down is surely better than one you can't pick up.

This haziness of definition is something shared with "Scottish literature", of course, and Jim Alison boldly confronts this topic in his article, *Towards and Overview of Scottish Children's Literature from 1823 to 2010*. Scottish writing for children was, until recently, seen as second-class; not true literature; hardly a fit subject of study and something to be grown out of – another feature perhaps shared with Scottish literature as a whole. But this is the twenty-first century, where publishers produce special issues of children's books, bound in dark and serious covers, so grown-ups may read them in public places without embarrassment; times are changing, and Tom Furniss can write unblushingly about his third and fourth year classes in Children's Literature at the University of Strathclyde.

Of course, no-one today regards Scottish writing as something shameful, or backward,

or second-rate. Or do they? Both Maureen Farrell and Matthew Fitt bring disturbing news from the classrooms of contemporary Scotland. On the evidence they have uncovered, all too often, either actively or by mere omission, Scottish children are being taught to cringe. The official guidelines offer good intentions and pious hopes: but it would appear that, in far too many Scottish schools, Scottish literature, language and culture is despised, and ignorance and shame is passed from one generation to the next. The title of Maureen's article – "*Miss, is this a real book?*" – stands as a grave indictment of current practice in many Scottish schools today.

If there are grounds for anger, though, there are also grounds for hope. Theresa Breslin, an award-winning children's author, illustrates how Scotland, once discovered, can prove an inspiration and a revelation. The continuing popularity of her work – exemplified here in her short story, *Notes in the Margin* – continues to kick holes in the walls built up by those who seem to fear that children might learn to speak, and think, with Scottish voices.

In our regular columns, we profile Professor John Pennington, a scholar of George MacDonald from St Norbert College in Wisconsin. For our Scots word of the season, Maggie Smith lets the *wean* out for a run around, and Alison Grant sides with *gille*.

No tears, now, please: the first step in conquering a problem is uncovering its existence. Once exposed, institutionalised stupidity cannot last in an interconnected world. Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.

The Unreliable Narrator



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