Introduction

In 1912, an unhatched revolutionary chick cries, “Strike down the wall!” and liberates itself from the “egg state,” a metaphor for the work each individual must do to overthrow capitalism. In 1940, ostriches pull their heads out of the sand and unite to fight fascism. In 1972, Baby X grows up gender free and happy about it.

These snippets of stories from Nature Talks on Economics, Oscar the Ostrich, and X: A Fabulous Child’s Story may be unfamiliar to you. Tales for Little Rebels brings together these little-known stories and others in a collection of forty-four children’s texts that exemplify the ideals of radical politics as they evolved over the twentieth century. The pieces gathered here reflect the concerns of their times, as seen in the examples above: chickens protest capitalism in the 1910s, ostriches fight fascism in the 1940s, and a genderless baby challenges the construct of gender in the 1970s. All of these tales address or attempt to create a liberated, informed, questioning, activist child.

The very idea of “radical children’s literature” may be surprising, because we do not commonly think of the connections between children’s literature and politics. But children’s literature has always been ideological. Consider an ABC from the 1680s: “A. In Adam’s Fall / We Sinned all.” And, next to a picture of a Bible, “B. Thy Life to Mend / This Book Attend.” The New England Primer teaches more than just literacy.

From the Puritans to the present day, the didactic tendency of books for younger children suggests that adults have no problem prescribing a moral framework for the young. Yet there is the tendency to fear that “political propaganda” will taint a young child’s “innocence.” Children’s literature is necessarily involved in both morality (making distinctions between right and wrong) and politics (which are about the power to effect change). Teaching children to obey a higher authority may be understood as a moral lesson, but it can also be understood as a political lesson.

Rather than teach children to seek redemption through prayer, twentieth-century leftists of various stripes used literature to encourage them to question the authority of those in power. Radicals taught children to take collective action to effect change, to trust their own instincts, to explore alternative social arrangements, and to use history to understand how and why today’s world has developed as it has.

For those who would argue that politics have no place in children’s literature, we maintain that there is no way to keep politics out. Stories that uphold the status quo (arguably the majority of works published for children) may not seem political, but they represent efforts to teach children that the current social, political, economic, and environmental orders are as they should be. McGuffey readers (widely used in nineteenth-century American schools) and Sunday school literature were extremely popular up through the early twentieth century and tended to advance a conservative agenda.

More subtly, stories that showed African Americans in subservient roles—if in any role at all—were the norm until the 1960s. Modern works uphold norms that glorify individualism and promote free enterprise; emphasize girls’ and women’s physical appearance and marriage as an ultimate goal; normalize car culture; or generally teach children to obey authority, to trust adults, and to avoid confronting the problems we face as a society. Notwithstanding the regressive tendencies of some books, children’s literature is very often marked by utopian feelings of possibility: children represent the chance for creating a better world.

Perhaps it is not surprising that conservatives condemn the domination of children’s literature by liberals. In recent years, right wingers have made efforts to counter “insidious left-wing propaganda” with such books as Katherine DeBrecht’s Help! Mom! There Are Liberals under My Bed! (2005) and its sequel Help! Mom! Hollywood Is in My Hamper! (2006). Bill O’Reilly’s Kids Are Americans Too (2007) and Lynne Cheney’s America: A Patriotic Primer (2002) and Our Fifty States: A Family Adventure across America (2006) have had considerable success, as has Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye’s Left Behind: The Kids (forty titles between 1998 and 2004). There is also faux radical children’s literature, such as the infamous Black Panther Coloring Book (1968) created by the FBI’s Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) in order to discredit the Black Panthers—a radical, black nationalist organization.
Ironically, while right wingers have perceived a liberal conspiracy in children’s literature, people on the left have tended to overlook the long tradition of truly radical children’s literature: witness educator Herb Kohl’s 1995 “plea for radical children’s literature,” which, he says, is almost impossible to find.² Yet, in recovering a radical tradition in children’s literature, we discovered far more work than we had room to include. We’ve collected texts that offer a taste of the U.S. Left’s “social imagination” (to borrow Kohl’s term) as it evolved over the course of the twentieth century.

Prominent trends evolved over time across a spectrum of the Left. There was never a unified voice of the Left, just as there was never a unified vision of the child. Much of what we found is compelling and still relevant today: the playful but incisive lessons about pesticides’ effects upon ecosystems in Charlotte Pomerantz and Jose Aruego’s The Day They Parachuted Cats on Borneo: A Drama of Ecology are as important now as they were when the book was published in 1971. Going even further back, Ruth Brindze’s Johnny Get Your Money’s Worth (and Jane Too) (1938) offers a much-needed corrective to the overwhelming tide of contemporary advertising directed at children. Carl Sandburg’s mockery of war in his Rootabaga Pigeons (1923) and Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish’s calls for human brotherhood in In Henry’s Backyard (1948) should encourage a new generation of children to reject war as a solution to conflicts based on race or religion. Parents looking for a “practical princess” whom their daughters might emulate can find one in Jay Williams’s 1969 story of that title. Look inside this book, and you’ll find a great deal more that feels unexpectedly contemporary.

Participants in a variety of radical and progressive movements have created literature for children as part of organized and informal efforts to educate young people. In the United States, this tradition stretches back at least to the abolitionists, who published journals such as The Slave’s Friend (1836–1839) and wrote stories for other children’s magazines. In the twentieth century, participants in most radical movements wrote and published stories for children: Socialists and lyrical leftists at the turn of the century; labor unionists, Communists, and antifascists in the 1930s and 1940s; pacifists and civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s; feminists and environmentalists in the 1970s and 1980s; and gay liberationists in the 1990s. Within a tradition of leftist politics in the United States, children have been at the center of radicals’ deepest aspirations, and traces of those aspirations can be found in literature they wrote for young people.

The children’s literature field represents a relatively free space for unconventional ideas. Juvenile publishing began to develop as its own division of the book field only in the 1920s. Led by educated, progressive women who had worked in libraries, as social workers, and in education, juvenile publishing tended to exclude material seen as inappropriate for children: violence, sex, and, at least in the baldest sense, politics. Still, the field absorbed something of librarians’ commitment to intellectual freedom. This fact, and a lack of critical attention—combined with significant interest in preparing children for the “real world”—sometimes translated into a surprising openness. Children’s literature became one of the main avenues open to radical writers during the McCarthy era, in part because no one thought it important to monitor a field largely controlled by women, whose authority on matters concerning children was considered unshakable. Langston Hughes, one of the few children’s authors called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, was not actually targeted for his children’s books. In fact, he wrote children’s books to escape the blacklist—books like The First Book of Negroes (1950), The First Book of Rhythms (1954), and The First Book of Africa (1960). Many reds in political trouble found work writing for major series published in the postwar period, including the First Books, the Real Books, the Landmark Books, and even the Little Golden Books.³

Some of the most famous twentieth-century American authors of children’s books leaned left. Syd Hoff, best known today for books like Danny and the Dinosaur (1958) and his New Yorker cartoons, published his first children’s book as A. Redfield, the pseudonym he used when writing for the communist Daily Worker and New Masses. His editor at New Masses, Crockett Johnson, is best remembered for Harold and the Purple Crayon (1955). And when Wanda Gag wrote Millions of Cats (1928), her reputation rested in part on the artwork she too had created for New Masses.⁴ Radical politics influenced Caldecott-winning author-illustrator Lynd Ward; Eve Merriam and Lilian Moore, both winners of the National Council of Teachers of English award for excellence in poetry for children; and William Steig, creator of Shrek (1990) and Sylvester and the Magic Pebble (1969). Their books are not transparently political, but they do
encourage children to use their imaginations, to question received authority, and to trust their sense of what feels right and true. And in a world where books get challenged for “encouraging children to disobey authority,” promoting independent thinking is political.6

In Tales for Little Rebels, we present works that have a more self-evident political dimension—although a few works’ politics are quite subtle. Most of the authors and illustrators would have identified themselves as left of center, but they were not necessarily part of a radical political party or movement. We have consciously pushed boundaries with what we have included: by not overemphasizing political affiliation, by including some pieces in which the political content is not immediately self-evident, and by including pieces that, while they may represent radical intent, are frankly dogmatic in their execution.

Some of the pieces reprinted here were published originally in movement periodicals, such as the New Pioneer, the communist magazine for children; Freedom, the radical black newspaper; or Ms. magazine, which had a “Stories for Free Children” column. Most selections, however, were published by major book publishers, but have gone out of print. Bringing forgotten, out-of-print texts back to life reminds us of the fickleness of both the market and the canon: we find great richness in these works, and in their broader project. Thus this book represents an act of recovery. If familiar radical children’s stories such as Dr. Seuss’s The Lorax (1971) or Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith’s The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales (1992) seem strangely absent, our larger message is that the longer legacy of radical children’s literature is hidden. If that legacy is not always one that current progressives would embrace, it is one that they—and their children—could learn from.

We concentrated on the twentieth century so that we could offer historical breadth but include works that still felt timely. We incorporated works published in the United States (or, in a few instances, works translated for American audiences) mainly for the sake of coherence, but it should be noted that comparable traditions can be found elsewhere. For instance, in Britain, Fabian Socialists like E. Nesbit and H. G. Wells wrote stories for children, and nonsense writing and fairy tales by people such as Edward Lear, George MacDonald, and Oscar Wilde had radical dimensions.6 Likewise, in Weimar Germany radicals rewrote traditional fairy tales with new messages.7

The balance of ethnic and racial groups represented leans strongly towards African Americans. For many years, African Americans represented the nation’s largest minority, and, furthermore, were the minority group most outspoken on civil rights and most prominent in American letters. As a result, there were simply more African-American texts available to us. We also sought texts for younger readers that had a political dimension more overt than simply an effort to represent minority experiences. We do include texts representing Mexican Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, and Native Americans, but these texts are by white authors. Our recommended reading list, at the back of this volume, offers a starting point for readers seeking more.

While we emphasize that major literary figures are part of the tradition we aim to recover, we also want to share the work of lesser-known authors. Some of the authors and illustrators are familiar figures from American arts and letters in general or children’s literature specifically: Lucille Clifton, Syd Hoff, Langston Hughes, Walt Kelly, Norma Klein, Munro Leaf, Julius Lester, Eve Merriam, Charlotte Pomerantz, Carl Sandburg, Dr. Seuss, Jay Williams, and Lynd Ward. Others are relatively unknown today, but we hope their work will find admirers among contemporary readers. To give only a few examples, Alfred Kreymborg was a major modernist poet and anthologist, William Gropper a well-known painter and radical political cartoonist, Alex Novikoff a world-renowned scientist, Caroline Nelson a popular lecturer and birth control agitator, and Ruth Brindze an important consumer advocate.

The book’s general introduction, section introductions, and introductions to each selection give readers tools for making sense of the pieces, offering biographical and historical backgrounds and, in some cases, interpretive frameworks. When possible, introductions to each story provide a biographical sketch of the author and illustrator, and describe how their lives intersected with the work’s political concerns. In those cases where we could uncover little information about a piece’s creators, we focused on situating the story in historical, social, political, and/or literary context. Generally speaking, however, the eight section introductions work towards providing that broad sense of context.

“R Is for Rebel,” the first section, highlights literature for the youngest children. The subsequent sections represent broad themes in left-leaning children’s
Our inclusion of a section on science—“Subversive Science and Dramas of Ecology”—demonstrates that an interest in science and technology animated many of the twentieth century’s radical movements. Teaching children about science can give them skills in critical thinking and make them question racist logic. It can expose the unjust distribution of resources and promote an ecological consciousness. But there was also a more practical incentive to write about science: postwar defense concerns and the space race created a ready market for juvenile science books in the United States. Thus, this genre became an important outlet for teachers who had been dismissed for political reasons and who reinvented themselves as juvenile authors.8

“Work, Workers, and Money” reflects the economic concerns that have inspired Marxist-influenced leftist movements, particularly socialism and communism. We have also included a story reflecting second-wave feminism’s concern with opening up professions for women and obtaining equal pay for equal work. “Organize” could have included many stories in this book, given the fact that collectivity and solidarity have been guiding principles of most leftist movements.

“Imagine” contains stories such as Lydia Gibson’s The Teacup Whale (1934), which, though not obviously radical, point to the potentially subversive power of imagination. When writers encourage children to speculate about what might be, they also invite them to question what is. Although fairy tales appear throughout this book, the “Imagine” section discusses how radicals have adapted the fairy tale form to advance subversive messages.9

“History and Heroes” highlights stories that look to the past to help children imagine a better future. Radicals recovered the stories of groups omitted from historical narratives, debunked myths used to uphold the existing social order, and used history as a lens to critically examine the present. The tales in “A Person’s a Person” treat difference—such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, or political affiliation—as a positive quality and challenge discrimination based on such difference. This section underscores the fight to grant full rights to each member of humankind as a central goal of most leftist movements in the twentieth century.

“Peace,” Little Rebels’ final section, emphasizes another major objective—one that, sadly, seems all the more relevant today. These stories advocate resolving conflict through peaceful means and, in some cases, suggest how to prevent the prejudices that can inspire war.

Tales for Little Rebels deliberately focuses on picture books and illustrated books geared at preteen readers. We have not ventured towards young adult literature because YA is so explicitly political that an anthology of radical young adult literature would comprise several more volumes. That said, a few texts are more appropriate for older children; these were included because of their historical significance, or because we did not find a text for younger children that addressed the same concerns. There are also several selections—such as Art Young’s Socialist Primer—that fall into the tradition of using the children’s book form as political commentary for adults. We’ve included as many illustrations as we can because they are so integral to the way children’s literature is conveyed.

All the stories are products of their times, and we found some material that, in hindsight, was not liberatory. In seeking a body of children’s literature written with the goal of creating progressive social change, we made the conscious choice to be honest about what we found. Our goal was not to whitewash history but to unearth it and make sense of it. Some selections in the very first section highlight the darker side of the Left’s social imagination. Nicholas Klein’s Socialist Primer traffics in the stereotype of the fat capitalist, and it is hardly progressive to attach moral values to a particular body type (or profession). Even more troubling, both “Pioneer Mother Goose” and “ABC for Martin” recall the communist Left’s rather blind worship of the Soviet Union. One hopes that readers today would take a very different lesson from selections such as these, a lesson about the dangers of mindlessly following a doctrine or dogma. They are included here because of their historical relevance and, taken together with the rest of the selections, their representation of a range of concerns taken up by twentieth-century leftist movements. They also serve as important reminders that truly progressive politics involve critical thinking, not blind devotion to a cause or an ideology.

Now is an opportune moment for this collection of radical children’s literature, both because many social, economic, and environmental efforts associated with the Left have been rolled back and because the
long legacy of radical children’s literature—a “usable past” for contemporary progressives—has been largely forgotten.10

Today, children’s literature continues to be a vehicle for expressing visions of a more just world, as our working list of recommended books begins to suggest. We wish to place such new work within a much longer tradition of radical children’s literature, but we also want to complicate that tradition. In this book, through largely forgotten children’s literature, we show the ideals the Left has fought for—but we also ask readers to think critically about how the stories invite children to wage those battles. In other words, in documenting a tradition of “radical children’s literature,” we want to call all of those terms—“radical,” “children,” and “literature”—into question.

What sort of literature is appropriate for children? What responsibility do adults have to children to keep them informed about critical issues of the day, such as global warming, terrorism, political corruption, and corporate greed? At what point must an ideal of “protection” end and one of preparation necessarily begin?

As you read the pieces collected here, we invite you to think about how they address issues that have animated radical thinkers of the past—as well as concerns still very much with us today. The next generation will face many challenges. Progressive tales, old and new, can help them address such problems, and inspire them to create a better future for everyone.

NOTES
3. For further discussion see Julia Mickenberg, Learning from the Left: Children’s Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States (New York: Oxford UP, 2006).
7. See Jack Zipes, Fairy Tales and Fables from Weimar Days (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1989).
8. For further discussion, see Mickenberg, Learning from the Left.

EDITORS’ NOTE
We have been frequently asked which of the stories younger children might enjoy and find most accessible. With caveats regarding the eclecticism of children’s tastes and interests, we include this list as good places to start:

The Black BC’s, by Lucille Clifton, p. 22
The Day They Parachuted Cats on Borneo: A Drama of Ecology, by Charlotte Pomerantz, p. 40
The Story of Your Coat, by Clara Hollos, p. 67
Girls Can Be Anything, by Norma Klein, p. 87
“Happy Valley,” p. 98
“Mary Stays After School or—What This Union’s About,” by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, p. 116
Mr. His: A Children’s Story for Anybody, by A. Redfield (Syd Hoff), p. 123
Oscar the Ostrich, by Jerome Schwartz, p. 127
The Teacup Whale, by Lydia Gibson, p. 151
The Practical Princess, by Jay Williams, p. 161
“Stories for Children,” from Freedom, p. 182
X: A Fabulous Child’s Story, by Lois Gould, p. 233
“The Princess Who Stood on Her Own Two Feet,” by Jane Desy, p. 243
Elizabeth: A Puerto Rican–American Child Tells Her Story, by Joe Molnar, p. 249
Three Promises to You, by Munro Leaf, p. 274

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