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"Radical" is a word that has often been misunderstood and been confused with extremism of some kind. The word "radical," however, stems from the Latin radicalis, which means “having roots” or “being rooted.” Radical qualities form the essence of a person or a thing. A radical person is someone who endeavors to understand the world by going to the root of a phenomenon, issue, or problem. A radical literature, especially a radical children’s literature, wants to explore the essence of phenomena, experiences, actions, and social relations and seeks to enable young people to grasp the basic conditions in which they live.

Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel’s book, Tales for Little Rebels, is a radical work in a very genuine sense. Not only do the authors recover neglected and “essential” works of children’s literature, but they also challenge us to rethink the essence of children’s literature and the way this literature has been transformed. As Mickenberg and Nel frankly state, their purpose is not to reclaim “great” literature for children that has been obfuscated; rather, they want to excavate the roots of children’s literature and to rewrite its history by shedding light on what has been dismissed and repressed. It is not by chance that their book is the first anthology of radical children’s literature in the United States that brings back to print unusual works of social and historical importance. We tend to repress the crucial issues that children need to know to adjust to a rapidly changing world. We tend to repress what is at the heart of the conflicts that determine our lives. We have tried to “nourish” children by feeding them literature that we think is appropriate for them. Or, put another way, we have manipulated them through oral forms of communication and prescriptions in print to think or not to think about the world around them. Mickenberg and Nel’s anthology is bound to be both enlightening and disturbing because it touches on the traumatic. It brings forth uncomfortable moments in American cultural history and challenges us to reconsider what we mean when we think and speak about children’s literature.

The political nature of children’s literature is at the core of their anthology. But it would be wrong to think that they view children’s literature only through a political lens. All literature is political or ideological to a certain extent. Yet, it is impossible to separate aesthetics from politics, just as it is impossible to separate entertainment or education from politics. From the very beginning, when books were first explicitly printed for children in the sixteenth century, politics played a “radical” role in primers, the Bible, and alphabet books. To become literate did not mean simply to develop the ability to read; literacy entailed (and still does) a learning process that produced responsible citizens who functioned in a hierarchical society according to its rules. To become literate involved learning to read the world according to letters and words that were to govern one’s beliefs and views and that were regulated according to specific guidelines and norms established by the church and state. Children’s literature always carried with it a social code that was part of the civilizing process. For instance, one of the earliest alphabet books, The Childes Guide (1667), included such phrases as “In Adam’s fall / We sinned all”; “This Book attend, Thy life to mend”; “The idle Fool / Is whipt at School.” Every alphabet book from the sixteenth century to the present was and is ideological. Children’s literature was never pure and objective, never just for instruction or just for amusement. Each book depended on artful and technological modes of production, communication, and distribution to convey messages and impart values and rules that might help a child adjust to a changing world and find a place within it. This place was often an assigned place, a place filled with signs that...
the child was taught to recognize. No matter whether it was a nursery rhyme, fairy tale, Bible story, myth, anecdote, or legend, the signs provided information that contributed to a child’s understanding of the way the world works.

Yet, understanding is a complex process. In the past, if children were born white and male into an educated and well-to-do family, these children generally found their family’s views on life and society represented and reinforced in a child’s literature intended to facilitate their understanding of the way the world operated. Understanding meant self-understanding and reconfirmation of privileges. The mainstream of children’s literature was their stream. If children were born of a different color, not to mention female, and if they were from the lower classes, children’s literature rarely, until the late nineteenth century, depicted and explained the world from their perspective. They were generally deprived of skills that enabled them to succeed in a world not of their making. If they wanted to succeed, they would have to adapt and prove their merits. Children’s literature was neglected by the majority of children, if, in fact, they read, or were taught to read, and children often felt that the teaching of reading was an imposition on their time, just as school was. Their concerns were not the concerns of upper-class literature, and they preferred popular literature. Even well into the middle of the twentieth century, the stories, images, plots, and views of “approved” children’s literature were predominantly those of people from educated and wealthy white classes. There might have been radical elements in some books that undermined the hegemonic social code of the civilizing process, but for the most part young people were not exposed to radical political ideas in the literature produced specifically for children that was flourishing by the nineteenth century. The beginnings of a radical literature for children can be seen in the pioneer essays and stories of Lydia Maria Child and in her journal Juvenile Miscellany (founded in 1826), the abolitionist literature published in the magazine The Slave’s Friend (1836–1839), and works by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, and other authors who published in the St. Nicholas Magazine (founded in 1873). Yet, the majority of American children were not encouraged to read or “compelled” to go to school until the latter part of the nineteenth century. If there were radical or different views represented in children’s literature, they were few and far between and were generally conveyed to “enlighten” privileged young readers.

With the great rise of literacy and compulsory schooling, with the end of slavery, with the beginning of the suffrage movement, with the introduction of the ideas of Darwin, Marx, and Freud, all toward the end of the nineteenth century, writers and illustrators began addressing problems in history, science, sociology, and politics in children’s literature in a much more explicit manner than they had ever done before. Mark Twain is a good example in books such as Tom Sawyer (1876) and Huckleberry Finn (1884). But he was only the tip of the iceberg at the end of the nineteenth century. The rise of strong political and social oppositional groups led to the formation of socialist, communist, anarchist, feminist, and civil rights organizations at the beginning of the twentieth century, and they produced diverse works for children that countered, contradicted, and opposed the mainstream products. It is impossible, I would contend, to understand L. Frank Baum’s fourteen Oz novels (1900–1920), initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century, without grasping how he was influenced by the suffrage and union movements, the political machinations of governments, and wars. But was Baum a radical writer? Did he consider himself a radical? What makes for a radical writer or illustrator? What were the conditions that brought forth radical writers at the end of the nineteenth century, not only in America but also and especially in England? These are some of the important questions that are raised in Mickenberg and Nel’s anthology.

As we know, there were all types of radical writers and illustrators who represented a wide array of political positions throughout the twentieth century. As Mickenberg and Nel point out in their numerous informative biographies, some were members of communist and socialist parties, some were nonaligned, and some were simply dissidents. Their focus is mainly on American radical writers and illustrators who took clear stands in their books. What is strikingly similar about all the works included in this anthology is that the writers and illustrators sought to clarify on behalf of children what it meant to grow up in America in a particular sociopolitical context. They addressed the roots of social problems. It did not matter whether these writers and illustrators produced nonfiction,
realistic fiction, or fantasy. There was always a didactic purpose behind their works that apparently drove them to write, draw, and compose. As Mickenberg and Nel point out, sometimes the didacticism was heavy handed and ruined their purpose, while at other times the authors were remarkably creative and innovative and were able to convey their messages in startling ways. Many of the writers and artists, who were nonaligned with a particular party, or who did not want to push a specific ideology, became so involved in grasping the roots of lived experiences and of social developments that they unconsciously produced “radical” books. In fact, any writer or illustrator who takes children seriously, who reflects critically and honestly on the way children are treated in the United States (and elsewhere), must, I contend, produce radical works.

What is interesting about the development of children’s literature in the latter part of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century is its general “radical” tendency. That is, almost all the best writers and illustrators, such as Maurice Sendak, Judy Blume, Jane Yolen, Robert Cormier, Chris Van Allsburg, Virginia Hamilton, Russell Hoban, Walter Dean Myers, Francesca Lia Block, Laurence Yep, Milton Meltzer, Julius Lester, and hundreds of others, no matter what their ideological bent may be, were and are sadly compelled to produce works with “radical” qualities if they want to be honest with children. I say “sadly” because the conditions under which children live today are deplorable. If we just think of the themes of books for children from five to seventeen, they concern child abuse, pedophilia, rape, anorexia, dysfunctional families, divorce, alcoholism, drug addiction, racism, corruption, abortion, perversion, dystopias, injustice, bullying, and so on. Most of the writers and illustrators who address young people endeavor to grasp the roots of social and political problems. One could generalize and argue that the social and political tendencies in American society drive writers to become radical. Politics plays a role in determining the scope and purpose of their works. Whether or not the writers and illustrators take a conscious ideological position in their writing, they must explore what causes social problems if they are going to be true to their craft and readership.

There is, however, a clear dividing line among writers and illustrators for children today. There are still many who write and illustrate for commercial reasons and self-aggrandizement and who produce banal and empty literature. They are still the majority and form the mainstream that “dumbs down” content for children. They write to maintain the culture industry as it is. But, to write and illustrate for children today, in my opinion, demands a conscious radical approach to social and political conditions. Fortunately, during the past forty years numerous writers and illustrators, along with publishers, educators, and critics of children’s literature, have responded to the “plight” of children, their families, and the education system by producing works that contain radical critiques, enabling children to think for themselves. The question, we must ask, is whether this strong radical tendency in children’s literature and scholarship has a chance to have an impact on children, given certain continuities in the mainstream of children’s literature. These continuities are fostered by the corporate tidal wave of consumerism and the production of books, toys, and other articles that promote violence, sexism, and racism. Not only does the culture industry frame the way in which life is mediated through cultural products, but it also contributes to an instrumentalization of the imagination. In this regard, Mickenberg and Nel’s anthology is a strong antidote to the dominant tendency of consumerism in our times. Not only do the works in their anthology reveal how vibrant and experimental the writers and illustrators were and still are, but by offering this wide selection of mostly out-of-print works, they uncover the historical roots of radical children’s literature in America and keep the “radical” tendency alive at a time when American culture must take stock of itself. Radical children’s literature will not guarantee a better future for American children, but it will certainly challenge them to think critically and creatively about their choices, and this can only have a positive impact on the future of American society.