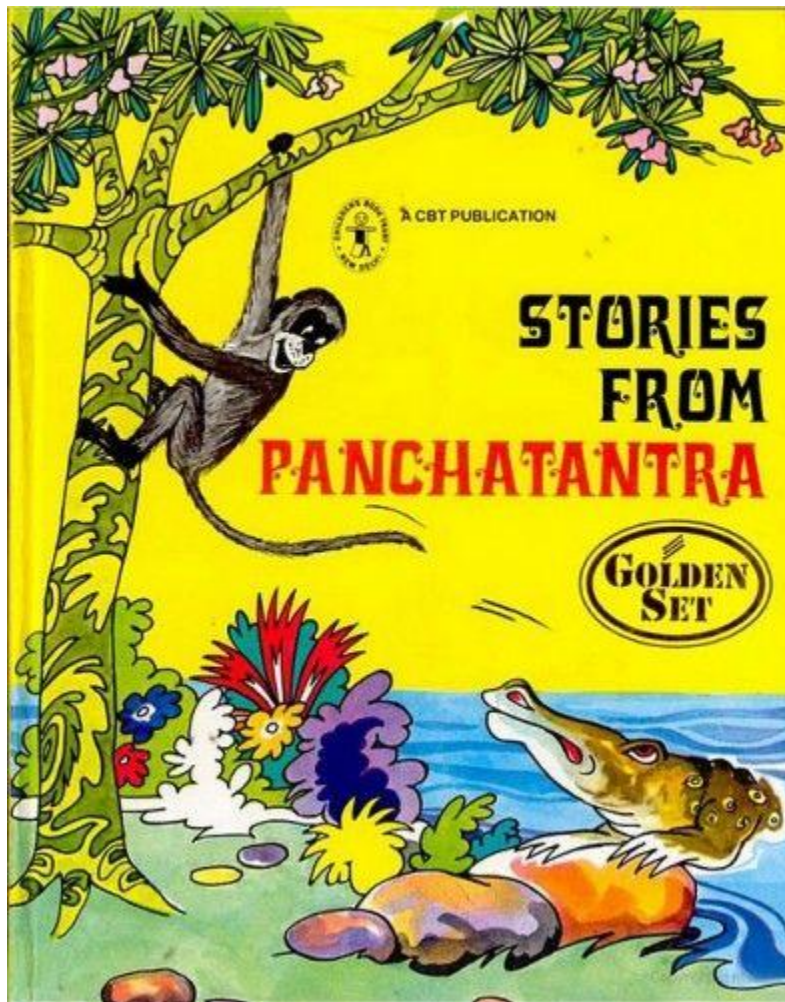


From Oral Tales to Percy Jackson
A Bird's Eye View of Children's Literature

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Abstract

Encyclopaedia Britannica describes Children's literature as the body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people. The

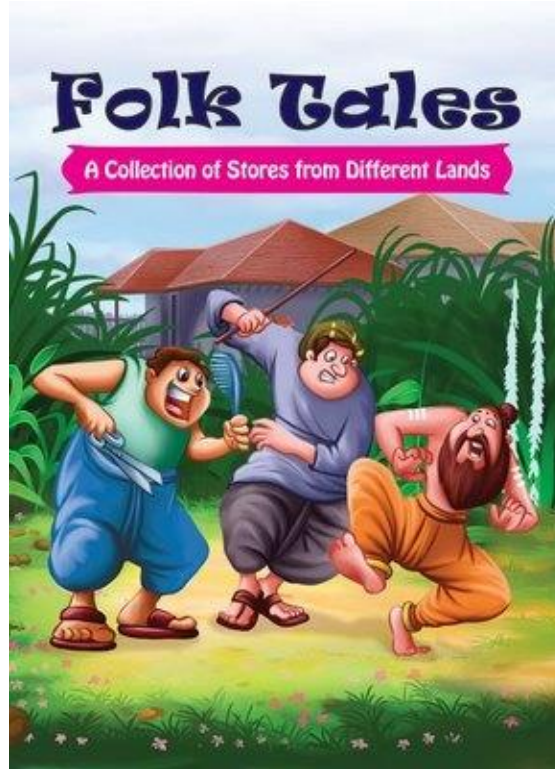
genre encompasses a wide range of works, including acknowledged classics of world literature,(sic) picture books and easy-to-read stories written exclusively for children, and fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs, and other primarily orally transmitted materials. This paper presents a bird's eye view of children's literature both in English and Indian Writing in English.

Keywords: oral tales, fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs, children's literature, *panchatantra*

Origin of Children's Literature

Children's literature began as adult-child story-telling. Inside a home, it was generally the mother or the grandmother who narrated the tales. Especially women who stayed at home with children spun wonderful tales to keep children occupied and entertained. The tales were fraught with beasts, monsters and ethereal heroines. Children cuddled with their mother while they told fantastic stories mostly with a moral at heart. This story-telling also strengthened the bond between the mother and the child. These tales were mostly home-made, clever inventions of the mothers themselves with morals according to individual child's need. But some were oral tales which were handed down from generation to generation through word of mouth.

Fables and Folktales



Beast fables and fairy tales were the earliest form of children's literature which has survived through oral mode. Fables were a rich source of moral which the children accepted as they were woven into stories. Well-known Fables are *Aesop's Fables* in Greece and *Panchatantra Tales* from India. Aesop who is believed to have been living around 5th or 6th century BC in Greece was a freed slave from Thrace. His fables were clever tales and were transmitted orally. Many of Aesop's fables were rewritten in Greek verse by the poet Babrius and in Latin verse by the Roman poet Phaedrus in the 1st century AD. Aesop's fables were accepted as the core of childhood reading and instruction since the time of Plato.

Panchatantra is the oldest collection of fables in Sanskrit dating around 3rd century BC to 4th century AD. It is attributed to Indian writer Vishnusharman and considered to be based on earlier oral traditions. The fables, primarily about animals, are organized into five books on various topics. They were said to be originally compiled for three young princes to gain *nīti* or knowledge in "the wise conduct of life" and to help them in the administration. These tales travelled around the world and were translated into various languages, as Edgerton says,

...there are recorded over two hundred different versions known to exist in more than fifty languages, and three-quarters of these languages are extra-Indian. As early as the eleventh century this work reached Europe, and before 1600 it existed in Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian, German, English, Old Slavonic, Czech, and perhaps other Slavonic languages. Its range has extended from Java to Iceland. . . [In India,] it has been worked over and over again, expanded, abstracted, turned into verse, retold in prose, translated into medieval and modern vernaculars, and retranslated into Sanskrit. And most of the stories contained in it have “gone down” into the folklore of the story-loving Hindus, whence they reappear in the collections of oral tales gathered by modern students of folk-stories.(5)

Western Trends

During the late 13th century Primers that contained just a collection of prayers were given for children to memorize and use. Later on they were printed with beautiful and elaborate alphabets followed by simple prayers. For children, creativity attracted them. With the advent of printing press more and more books were available for children. Among the first published books were William Caxton’s *Book of Curtesye* (1477) and translation of *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* (1484) providing instruction on how to behave in a noble household for both girls and boys respectively. Caxton also issued the beast fable *Reynard the Fox* (1481) and *Aesop’s Fables* translated into English. This sort of moral writing for children continued through Renaissance and Reformation period. During the 15th century children were considered to be born morally corrupt. The parents and elders strictly supervised and disciplined them. This attitude became even more pronounced with Puritanism at its rise during 16th and 17th century. The puritans thought that moral education to be the only salvation of the children and took to it seriously. They prepared the children for the grim reality of death and afterlife. As a result the literature produced at the time was ascetic and austere. It spoke about sacrifice, about saintly deaths of various children. It was the time when the great classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) was published which was enjoyed by both the adults and children alike.

A Thin Strand of Imagination

In spite of the gloomy and sombre atmosphere, a thin strand of imagination survived in the form of hornbooks and chapbooks. A new type of children's book, called the hornbook, appeared during the 16th century. It consisted of a printed page covered by a transparent sheet of horn and mounted on a square of wood with a handle at one end for the child to hold. It was used for elementary instruction and contained the letters of the alphabet, Prayer, Roman numerals, numbers, and so on. The chapbook, which emerged during 17th century, was an unstitched pamphlet usually consisting of about seventy unstitched folded sheets. These were peddled from door to door in England and hence its name (as chapmen means peddlers). Its subject matter varied from rhymes, folktales and ballads to medieval romances. The book was made of rag paper and contained rough illustrations. These books were also called "penny histories" as they were cheap or "toy- books". The seventeenth and eighteenth century saw the flourishing of the chapbooks after which it lost its popularity.

Seventeenth Century Ideas

At the close of 17th century John Locke championed for the cause of education with pleasure through his work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). He states that a child's mind is like *tabula rasa* i.e. 'clean slate' which could be impressed upon by setting an ideal example by the elders. He says that children cannot remember rules and they commit the same mistake again and again. This perspective made children's literature to break away from its narrow puritanical clutches. Locke supported education through pleasure. People realized for any children's book to serve its purpose, instruction and enjoyment should go hand in hand. The pop – up books and picture books achieved this goal. They formed an important part in the memory of childhood. Children adored these books. They were like treasures for a child in its quest for reading, "Telling tales through imagery is what storytellers have done through the ages" (Lerer 321). Reading these books involved almost all the senses of children. The beautiful and colourful pictures, the intoxicating smell of these books, the feel of its sheets and the crackling pages enchanted them. They made reading interactive to children. Two English manuscripts which date back to early 16th century show illustrated beasts and flowers. Thomas Borenan's *Description of Three Hundred Animals* and John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket – Book* were significant books produced around the early part of the 17th century for children. In late 18th century,

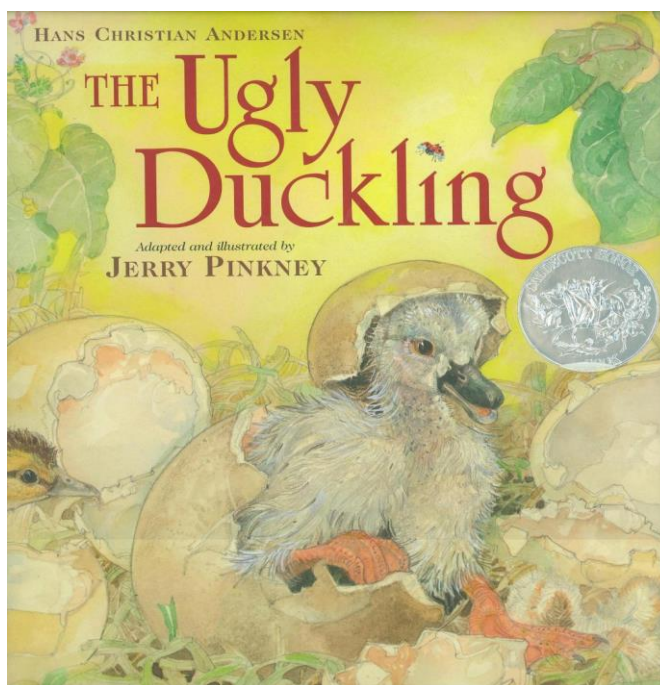
publisher and bookseller Robert Sayer developed “Harlequinades” which he called Metamorphoses books. These books were really single sheets, folded into four sections. They used a series of illustrated flaps which when lifted revealed hidden scenes in the narrative. These books were used to teach morals. By early 19th century movable books that had pop-up pictures in every page became very famous. But it was Newbery who first successfully brought children books into commercial market. This commercialization of children’s books and bringing it into open-market helped in its professionalization.

17th century also saw the resurrection and compilation of fairy tales. Fairy tales remained scattered and oral until Charles Perrault collected them in the 17th century AD. He is best remembered for such favourite tales such as “Cinderella”, “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Sleeping Beauty”. Perrault’s principle was to use traditional tale as a tool to educate moral values to children. Following in his footsteps, a very serious and major work in this area was taken by two German Scholars and brothers, Jacob Ludwig Karl Grimm and Wilhelm Karl Grimm, known popularly as the Grimm Brothers. Jacob Grimm originally began to collect the fairy tales or ‘Marchen’ as a part of his study of philology and folklore. He found out that folklore was on the brink of extinction and he wanted to recover the sources of Germanic linguistic and literary culture. He along with his brother Wilhelm Grimm collected the oral fairy tales from various sources and published as three-volume Household Tales, *Kinder-und Hausmarchen* (1812-1813) in German which was later translated into English. The collection was later expanded as *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* which included such great tales like “Hansel and Gretel”, “Snow White” and “Rapunzel”.

Hans Christian Andersen

Following them, Hans Christian Andersen, a Danish writer acquired enduring fame through fairy tales. Several of his famous tales include “The Emperor’s New Clothes” (1837), “The Little Mermaid” (1837), “The Ugly Duckling” (1845) and “The Little March Girl” (1848). His influence could be felt in many of the modern writers and later fairy tales. In England, towards the end of the 19th century, Andrew Lang wrote one of the best – known collections of European fairy tales in a series of volumes titled by colour beginning with the *Blue Fairy Book*

(1889) and ending with the *Lilac Fairy Book* (1910) which includes memorable tales like “Rumpelstiltskin”. He also wrote fantasy novels such as *The Gold of Fairnilee* (1888).



Industrialization – Lamb and Other Writers

Industrialization of the 18th and 19th century led to the emergence of working class population. This along with commercialisation of children’s books led to the development of children’s literature. Until the late 18th century no clear distinction was made between instruction and entertainment in children’s literature. Most stories and poems written for children were designed to convey useful information or moral advice. Owing to the growth of religious freedom in England and in newly established America, children’s literature became less didactic and more amusing. The egalitarian principles spread by French revolution also contributed to this. A major influence in this development was French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, who, in his novel *Emile* (1762) pointed out that the mind of a child is not merely the mind of an adult in miniature, and that it must be considered on its own terms.

Around this time many great writers turned their attention to writing for children. English essayist, Charles and his sister Mary Lamb adopted versions of Shakespeare’s works into stories for children in their *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807). Nathaniel Hawthorne, a great American

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novelist retold Greek classical myths in *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* (1851). It was written in the form of a frame story where a college student tells these tales to a group of children and the writer followed it with a sequel, *Tanglewood Tales for Girls and Boys* (1853). Even Oscar Wilde, the great British playwright and novelist wrote some short fantasies for children that were collected in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1891).

19th and 20th Centuries

19th and 20th centuries saw the development of children's literature all around the world. In contrast to the past didactic structure, 19th century romanticism saw the flowering of children literature. They were no more just adapted, collected or translated tales, it contained fantasy, adventure and fun. Writers took their young audience seriously and produced original stories with interesting and memorable characters. Moreover children's literature was no longer written for just very young children. It attracted children, youngsters and adults alike. There was an increasing awareness among the writers about the adolescent population. The problem for the writer is to understand where children's literature stops and adult literature begins and what will adolescents who are neither children nor adults will be interested in reading. The consciousness of adolescence came during the nineteenth century, until then one is either a child or a grown-up, there is no in between. But as psychological science developed there was an increasing awareness of adolescent age – a cross-over period between childhood and adulthood. But it was some years before literature evolved to accommodate literature for teenagers. During the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century many works were written which can be termed as adolescent literature and these were later termed as young adult literature or coming-of-age literature. Works like *Little Women* (1868), *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *Kidnapped* (1886), *The Jungle Book* (1894) appeal to the teenage boys and girls.

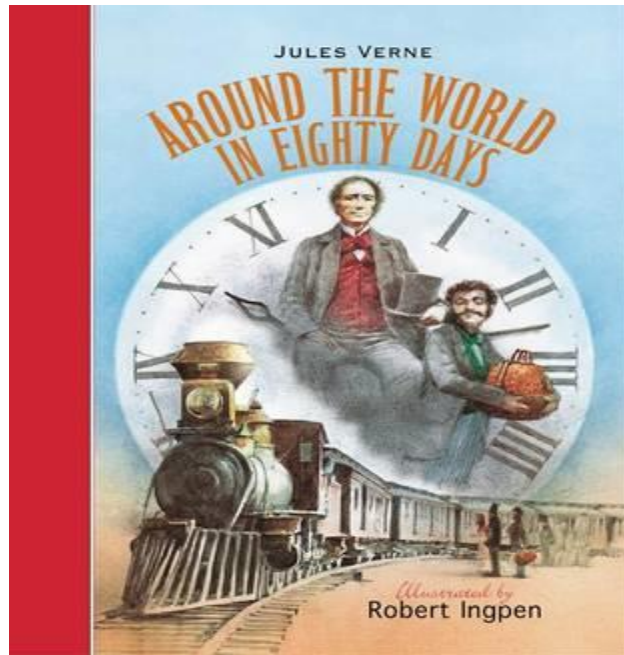
Young Adult Literature

Young Adult literature at the beginning was written from an adult's perspective reaching out to youngsters, to guide them as they entered into adulthood like Louisa May Alcott's *Little*

Women (1868) which depicts realistic Victorian life where the writer shows the Victorian values expected of young girls. But later on there was an increasing awareness regarding the problems faced by teenagers. As a result the young adult writers started to write about coming to terms with adolescence, the confusing complexities of emotional and psychological changes, search for identity and alienation from the society. During the later part of the 20th century young adult literature became more comprehensive to include real life problems with themes like sexual awakening, drugs, racism and bullying.

Science and Technology Tales

With the development in science and technology the imagination of several writers were kindled to produce a new genre - Science Fiction. Now even the sky is not the limit when there are a lot of mysteries in this world and beyond it waiting to be discovered. Pioneer of this type of fiction is, Jules Verne, French author who is regarded as the father of science fiction. He wrote many popular books which were later translated into English like *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1874), *From the Earth to the Moon* (1873), *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (1873), *Mysterious Island* (1875) and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873). Some of his works foresaw the development in science and technology of future. Time and again most of his works were adapted into movies. Another writer who is remembered along with Verne is England born H.G. Wells. His science-fantasy novels depict the future; sometimes they render a dystopian future of technology like in *The War of the Worlds* (1898). His all time classic is *The Time Machine* (1895) which was the inspiration to all later time related fantasies and movies. Including *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) he wrote more than 80 works. His works were also made into hit movies.



American Children's Literature

American literary culture slowly overcame the British paternalistic past. They created their own niche in the field of children's literature. American writer, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, whose pseudonym is Mark Twain is well-known for his work *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and its sequel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* celebrates boyhood in a town on the Mississippi River, while *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is considered as Twain's masterpiece. The book follows the adventures of the title character, Huck, a boy who flees his father using a raft down the Mississippi River with a runaway slave, Jim. Twain's children's book *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882) is based on switching identities. Twain's writing is notable for its realistic language and places and his biting satire of hypocrisy and feudal England.

Darwin's theory of evolution proposed in the later part of the 19th century gave new dimension to animal stories or rather animals in stories. They were not just walking and talking one dimensional stereotypical characters rather they were given complex thought process and emotions. Kenneth Grahame, an English writer wrote a classic, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). The novel revolves around anthropomorphized animals like mole, rat and toad. The novel is believed to be an expansion of Grahame's bed time stories to his son.

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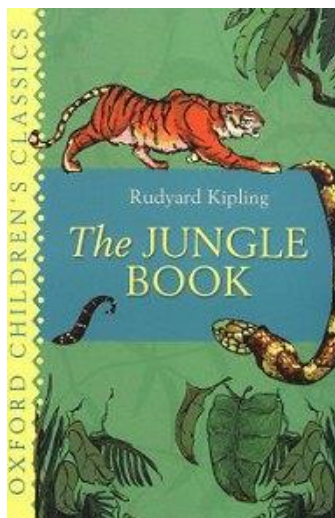
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British Colonies

British colonisation and discovering new places led to the introduction of exotic animals and birds like lions, tigers, elephant, kangaroo and peacock in children's tales. Rudyard Kipling's work is mostly set in imperial India and Burma. He was a prolific writer who wrote acclaimed novels, poems and short stories. He was the first English writer to be awarded Nobel Prize in literature. He wrote children's favourite work and one of the classics, *The Jungle Book* (1894) about a small boy Mowgli who grows up in the forest among the animals and followed it with a sequel, *The Second Jungle Book* (1895). He also wrote *Just So Stories for Little Children* (1902) where he humorously explains various natural phenomena. *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910) are his other works and many of his short stories are collected in *Kipling's Fantasy* (1992).



Fantasy and Children's Literature

Within children's literature fantasy occupies an important place. The world of children and their literature is a world of reality and fantasy juxtaposed; a magic kingdom, completely devoid of the obvious control of adults. Fantasy's origin stretches far back into oral tales. Oral tales evolved into folk tales, fairy tales and myth. Fantasy denotes any prose that is not realistic. Woronoff in his foreword to *The A to Z of Fantasy Literature* traces fantasy's roots, "For fantasy literature, while rather young in terms of scholarly classification, is as old as they come in reality. Myths and folktales, fairy tales and fables were around even before there was much of a

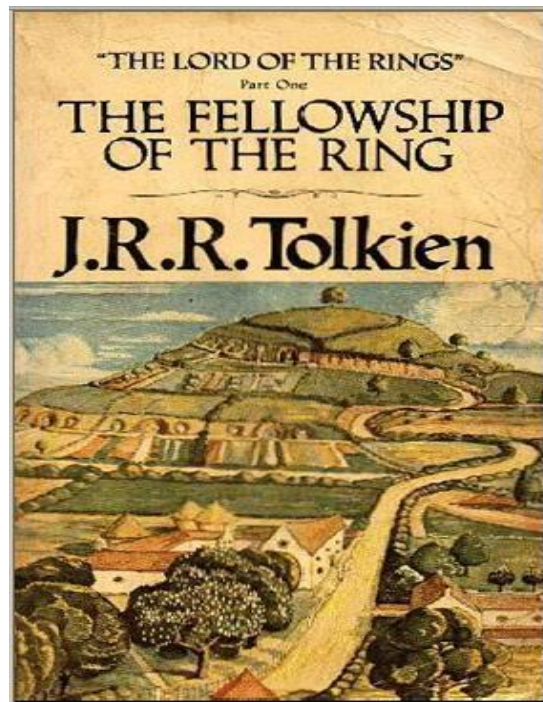
written literature...” (ix). At the beginning, fantasy was considered as the realm of only children with whom the adults can get away with any tales. But Sterritt thought otherwise, “Fantasy . . . is not just the domain of childhood. The desire to escape the limited confines of our mental and physical routines and explore other dimensions of existence fuels much of human life . . .” (80)

Fantasy as a form on its own developed in Britain in the later part of the 18th century. Though most of fantasy belongs to the sub-category of children literature, it is enjoyed by readers of all ages. Only a few writers dared to write full fantasies and among them only a select few succeeded in the attempt. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson also known as Lewis Carroll pioneered in this field. He wrote the most loved Alice stories, *Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), through which created immortal characters like the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire cat and the Queen of Hearts. The works contain nonsensical poems and mathematical byplays which only adults can understand. Hence, his works appeals to both children and adults alike.

Fantasy gained popularity during 20th century through the efforts of “Inklings”. The group was an informal literary discussion group which had several members associated with the University of Oxford who held in high regard the narrative in fiction and supported writing fantasy. This group helped young writers to share their writings and discuss. Fantasy drew new blood with two giants J.R.R. Tolkien and his friend and a fellow member of the group Inklings, C.S. Lewis. Another notable member of the Inklings group who wrote fantasy was Charles Williams. Charles Williams wrote theological thrillers like *War in Heaven* (1930) which is about a Grail hunt in modern England. Most of his works have an undercurrent of Christian morality, his work *The Place of the Lion* (1931), features Platonic archetypes, while *Many Dimensions* (1931) revolves around the misuse of King Solomon’s Holy Stone. In his *The Greater Trumps* (1932) a pack of Tarots has disastrous power and *His Descent into Hell* (1937) features fantastical characters such as doppelgangers, ghosts and succubus. His work *All Hallows Eve* (1945) features a woman’s ghost roaming around in the post-war London.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, a South African born British professor became a legend in the fantasy writers’ realm with his Lord of the Rings series. He is sometimes referred to as the father of modern fantasy. Tolkien’s first and best known fiction was *The Hobbit or There and*

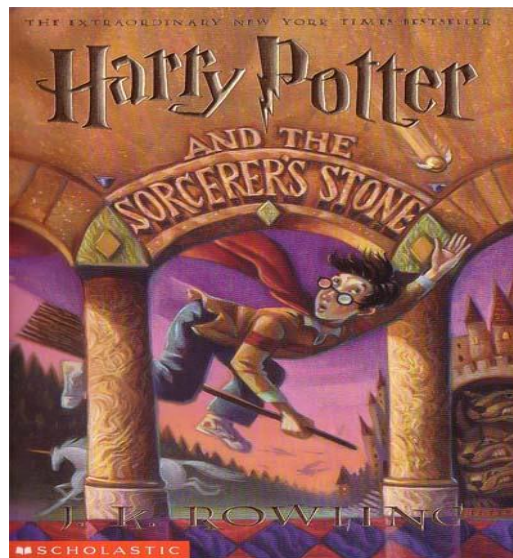
Back Again (1937). It is a story about a hobbit, Bilbo Baggins who goes in quest of a treasure guarded by a dragon. Tolkien's publisher was thrilled and asked him for a sequel which later developed into a multi-volume epic fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings* which was published seventeen years later in 1954-1955. It was published in three parts, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*. Nearly 50 years after its publication, Tolkien's epic tale has sold more than 100 million copies and been translated into more than 25 languages. *The Hobbit* and all the three parts of *Lord of the Rings* have been re-produced as successful movies.



A close friend of Tolkien and a fellow Inkleling is C. S. Lewis. He wrote one of the greatest classical children fantasies of all times *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a series of seven books. He started writing the first book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as early as 1939 but abandoned it in between and resumed it again in 1948. *The Chronicles of Narnia* are a series of seven books in the order of publication, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), *Prince Caspian* (1951), *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952), *The Silver Chair* (1953), *The Horse and His Boy* (1954), *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) and *The Last Battle* (1956). Among them,

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Prince Caspian and The Voyage of the Dawn Treader were adapted into movies.

Following the footsteps of Inklings, one of the best-selling authors of contemporary period is Joanne Kathleen Rowling who had achieved tremendous success with a boy wizard named Harry Potter. She was very much influenced by Lewis and Tolkien when she was growing up which helped her in writing the *Harry Potter* series. She has written a sequence of seven novels in the *Harry Potter* series which follows the adventures of the young boy named, Harry Potter who is also a wizard. The book has been translated into more than 70 languages and read by a worldwide audience irrespective of the age. All the seven parts have been adapted into blockbuster movies. Her first novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was published by Bloomsbury Children's Books in June 1997. The same novel was published in America under a different title – *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the year 1998. This was followed by six other titles in the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix* (2003), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007).



Other Notable Writers of the Contemporary Period

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A few other notable writers of the contemporary period are Suzanne Collins and Rick Riordan from America. Suzanne Collins published five volumes of epic fantasy, *The Underland Chronicles* which is set in a subterranean world under New York City. Similar to *Alice in the Wonderland*, a eleven year old boy Gregor and his younger sister fall down a hole in their basement and discover Underland. His quest and adventures is the series. But what really gained the author the recognition and popularity was *The Hunger Games* series. It is a trilogy – *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mocking Jay* (2010) set in the dystopian The Hunger Games universe. The story is set in a country called Panem with a wealthy Capitol surrounded by twelve states in various levels of poverty. Every year contestants are selected from all twelve states to participate in the Hunger Games in a television live death match. The winners District will be rewarded with food and other necessary supplies. The series follows young Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark as they participate in the games representing District 12. After they win the game in the first series Katniss inadvertently sparks a rebellion in various districts which incites the Capitol and they are forced to participate in another game against former victors. But Katniss joins rebellions of District 13 who plan to overthrow Capitol and kill President Snow. In the end both Snow and Coin (the President of District 13) are killed. All the three parts were adapted into movies which became immediate hits.

Rick Riordan gained popularity with his Percy Jackson and the Olympians series. The book is a mythological fiction with the typical teenage protagonist. Riordan brings into contemporary life Greek mythical characters when Jackson realizes that he is a demigod. It is a pentalogy, written in five parts, *The Lightning Thief* (2005), *The Sea of Monsters* (2006), *The Titan's Curse* (2007), *The Battle of the Labyrinth* (2008) and *The Last Olympian* (2009). In each part the writer cleverly combines mythology with reality as Percy Jackson goes from one adventure in to another.

Change in the Views of Critics Regarding Children's Literature

Critics until recently were hesitant to consider children's literature as a separate genre on its own, it was either just fables or tales or stories for children. The success of *Harry Potter* series and *Percy Jackson* stories has inspired many writers to step into this rarely ventured area. From oral tales to fantasies of epic proportion children's literature has evolved into a full-fledged

genre through the years. It has come across indifference but now is enjoying its share of limelight. It has evolved along with technology and metamorphosed into various forms like online graphic novels, digital comics, but still retaining its originality. In this 21st century a new era of children's literature has dawned.

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