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Learning from the Left:
Children's Literature,
the Cold War, and
Radical Politics in the
United States

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The Secret History of Children's Literature

Several years ago my son and I memorized a Dr. Seuss story I planned to use in my dissertation. "What Was I Scared of," published in a collection of stories (which included a more famous tale about Sneetches, some with plain bellies and others with "stars upon thars"), tells the story of a young character who periodically encounters a pair of pale green pants.[1] Frightened (although not at first willing to admit it) by the specter of this strange entity, the narrator is eventually forced to confront his fears. Once he does, meeting those "spooky empty pants ... face to face," he realizes that the pants are not so scary or so different after all, and they become friends. My son loved it because, I suspect, of the fanciful characters, catchy rhymes and rhythms, and the chance to explore his own fears. And I loved it. Published in the early 1960s, it questioned perceived racial differences; it drew children into the politics of the era (a politics in which the 1954 *Brown* ruling had already required that many of them play a central role); and it manifested a belief in childhood as a period of radical possibility. The United States has changed since 1961, partly (as Mickenberg would agree) thanks to the young people who grew up reading such books, but learning this story with my

son in the early twenty-first century still provided a great opportunity for me to talk with him, in a fun and fairly subtle way, about some of my most deeply held social and political values and to encourage him to imagine new ways of seeing the world.

Julia Mickenberg's *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* explores mostly less well-known children's literature of the post-World War II period (much of which expressed similar themes to those reflected in the "pale green pants" story) and suggests that leftists found in the expanding children's book field a relatively "free" and potentially powerful way to share their radical views about economic conditions, social justice, race, and sometimes even gender. Mickenberg argues that children's literature became a "key outlet" for leftists, a place where they could pose significant challenges to the status quo and still "operate below the radar of red-hunters." (p. 5) This came during a period when leftists found other avenues of expression closed to them and which scholars have often assumed (although not as much recently) to be marked by conformity and the suppression of radicals

and their ideas.

What we might call the “secret history” of children’s literature and the Left has also operated below the radar—of scholars. Mickenberg rectifies this, ably demonstrating that we cannot understand the Cold War, the 1950s, the history of the Left, the rise of the children’s book field, or the direction of that field, without looking at the connections between leftists and mid-twentieth century children’s literature.

Mickenberg’s book is roughly chronological. It begins with a chapter that explores the intersection between early twentieth-century (lyrical) leftists’ “romantic faith” in education and “the child’s potential to redeem society,” and the rise of progressive educational philosophies, and sometimes practices (p. 30). Influenced by progressive educators like John Dewey, leftists wrote children’s books in the 1910s and 1920s which expressed their belief in the power of education and of children to create a more democratic society. Contrary to what most scholars of children’s literature suggest, early twentieth-century books for young people were not just about maintaining social, economic, and political order of the United States. By encouraging imagination and cultural appreciation, and by giving young people the “tools to understand and control their environment” in the books they wrote, leftists hoped to realize the revolutionary possibilities that they, as well as those on the Right (e.g. the Ku Klux Klan), believed to be inherent in childhood (p. 40).

In chapter 2 Mickenberg explores proletarian children’s literature produced in the United States during the 1930s, a time in which communists made significant efforts to organize children and youth through the Young Pioneers and other organizations and camps. Mickenberg argues that the literature leftists published for young people in this period reflected a belief in the natural radicalism of children and that children should be taught about, rather than shielded from (as most Americans believed), politics and the “harsh realities of society and economics” (p. 53). Although, especially at first, decidedly sectarian in nature (much more so than that of the lyrical leftists of the preceding generation), this children’s literature, Mickenberg suggests, was less ideologically rigid than adult proletarian literature produced during the same period. Indeed, authors from the Left often expressed their politics through “seemingly apolitical production books”—books that explained, step by step, the workings of the world (p. 62). This literature’s antiracist themes also made it markedly different from typ-

ical Soviet literature—as well as from mainstream American children’s literature.

In chapters 3-5 Mickenberg explores changes in the children’s book field and leftist’s “ironic” influence on the field, as writers, editors, and members of important child-centered organizations. She suggests that a “waning belief in childhood innocence,” a “more democratic vision of adult-child relations,” and the rise of an “antifascist common sense” meant that, during World War II and the Cold War, the “Leftist agenda coincided with national imperatives” (p. 89). This convergence opened opportunities for leftists in children’s trade publishing at the same time they found other forms of cultural production closed to them. Shifting views of childhood and an “increasing emphasis on democracy, citizenship, and social justice” helped create a market for the kinds of children’s books that leftists wanted to write (p. 92). In this same historical context librarians and other child guardians began prioritizing intellectual freedom and child advocacy over child protection. They also began to shift the criteria they used for judging the value of children’s books. New booklists and awards especially promoted socially significant books—books, for instance, that challenged any kind of intolerance.

To be sure, notes Mickenberg, leftists operated within “limits.” There was “no black list per se in children’s publishing,” in part because of support from the child-guardian establishment, because it was a field largely controlled by women (hence devalued and less conspicuous), and because it was one which retained an “aura of purity” (p. 14). But leftist writers also framed “controversial issues within a conciliatory patriotic discourse.” (p. 156) Moreover, as she explains in detail in the last two chapters, leftist most frequently expressed their politics indirectly, in children’s books on science and history.

According to Mickenberg, using the “power of science as a tool for liberation” had a long history among leftists (p. 183). It is unsurprising then that in an era marked by frenzied concern over Sputnik, science books became the most common way for leftist writers to question the cold war status quo. It was also, ironically, a method supported by the National Defense Education Act and other state, federal, and corporate initiatives (p. 176). Mickenberg also explains how Cold War conditions expanded the market for left-authored biographies and history books, including African American history books. Radical authors who worked in this genre were able to “recast memory in new terms,” to talk about “the rank and file of the people at a time in which class had

fallen out of the national vocabulary,” and to encourage young readers to challenge racial and gender conventions (p. 245).

Mickenberg ends her book by looking at the rise of the Council on Interracial Books for Children. This group, she argues, which profoundly influenced the children’s book field and promoted leftist children’s literature, was itself influenced by that literature. Mickenberg also tentatively suggests a connection between leftist children’s books and youth activism of the 1960s. For instance, she views the fact that the students who initiated the Greensboro sit-ins read and discussed the left-authored book, *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* (1956), before beginning their protest, as a contributing if not causative relationship.

Mickenberg’s book is sensitive to shifting notions of childhood, their place in public and political discourse, and how those notions are reflected in children’s books. Her study is inter-disciplinary in the best sense of the term. It provides astute analysis of specific texts, but is careful to situate them and their authors in particular historical contexts.

Her book is a great example of recent work in the history of childhood that connects children’s history to larger historiographical subjects and debates. Certainly Cold War historians, cultural historians, and historians of Communism and the Left will recognize the important contributions her study makes to their fields. I would have liked, however, to have seen her pay more attention to young people themselves as significant historical actors. The writers she talks about clearly had a sense of children and youth as autonomous, independent people with revolutionary potential. Indeed, this is a point that begins to sound redundant in the book. Yet we do not see them acting. To be sure, bringing out children’s agency and getting a sense of their actions, beliefs, and influence is the most difficult part of doing children’s history. And to her credit, questions about how young people perceived and were influenced by leftist children’s literature are ones Mickenberg, at least, raises (and offers anecdotal evidence for), although not until the epilogue. But even if, as she admits, a cause and effect relationship between children’s literature and youth participation in protest movements is impossible to prove, children’s historians will want to know more about what young readers thought about the books she discusses, how they were influenced by them, and how they themselves influenced those books and the children’s book field in general.

Learning from the Left is a compelling and highly

readable book. Mickenberg’s exhaustive archival research combined with her personal interviews makes for a study that feels both solid and intimate. Her endnotes are meticulous and offer additional insights that, at times, I wish had been included in the text (see, for example, p. 283 n. 5; p. 322 n. 45). Those personal interviews and Mickenberg’s own family background, however, perhaps also make it difficult for her to step back from her subject at times. In my mind she attributes too much to leftists/radicals. These, she recognizes, are vague terms and ones which her study makes even vaguer at times (see her explanation of terms, p. 285 n. 24). This brings me to my main criticism of this book. Leftists were not the only ones to embrace or express ideas about social justice, and other liberal themes and values in children’s literature (or other youth-centered forums, for that matter) during the period she examines. Certainly Mickenberg recognizes the influence of progressive educators and philosophies on leftist authors. But she maintains that “progressive” often meant leftist; then she suggests that their ideas became a casualty of the Cold War. Progressive education, and the related intercultural education movement and their values, however, did not die in the 1940s. In fact, I would argue that their ways of thinking about children and education became mainstream in the postwar period. The trend toward looking at the “whole child,” of viewing children as independent, as naturally free from racial prejudice, as active agents of social and political change, was hardly limited to leftists. And leftists were not the only ones to look at juvenile delinquency as a complex socioeconomic issue. It seems to me that Mickenberg would do well to ask more questions about why it was possible for leftists to enter, remain in, and influence the growing children’s book field. She might also look for similar themes in children’s books by non-leftist authors and at how non-leftists influenced the field as well. A comparative perspective might help us see more clearly what ideas and influences were actually leftist. Perhaps leftists’ success in children’s publishing has to do with a larger liberal sensibility about childhood and youth—a postwar liberalism centered on children and ideas about childhood, and one to which Americans of all (or many) political stripes adhered. That said, this is an important book and one that offers a “wonderful door,” to use one of Mickenberg’s analogies, to a whole range of historical subjects.

Note

[1]. See Theodor Seuss Geisel, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* reprinted in *A Hatful of Seuss: Five Favorite Dr. Suess Stories* (New York: Random House, 1996), 179-203; 220-243.

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