**Children’s Literature**

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Lecture: The History of Children’s Literature (Part 1)

1. The “Oral Tradition”
	1. Stories passed from generation to generation, from mother to child, are as old as language itself.
	2. These ancient stories contain information about how human beings thought about the world, about society, and about the unknown before the rise of writing systems.
	3. Sometimes called “myths,” many versions of these ancient stories survived into modern times as “traditional” stories which include many types of tales including: creation myths, fables, fairy tales, folklore, and legends.
	4. Myths are common in all world cultures, and many have recurring plots and characters. These common stories are called “archetypes.” Joseph Campbell connected ancient myths from around the world to human behavior and psychology. He believed that the story of the Hero is a metaphor for how we all face the fear of death.
	5. Folk and fairy tales can be classified into systems that categorize them according to their themes. One such system is called the [Aarne-Thompson-Uther Classification of Folk Tales](http://www.mftd.org/index.php?action=atu).
2. The earliest beginnings of children’s literature
	1. The earliest published works that are produced specifically for children don’t occur until the beginning of the 18th Century.
	2. In his book *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), Phillipe Aries argued that before this time childhood itself didn’t exist, at least not as we think of it today. Other scholars point out that childhood instruction would have taken place prior to this in a religious setting using Bible stories as training tools.
	3. In 1690 British philosopher John Locke published “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” in which he put forward the idea that the human infant is born *tabula rasa,*a “blank whiteboard” (to use a modern equivalent.) It is the job of the wise parent (or teacher) to carefully fill that whiteboard with important information.
	4. The rise of an educated middle class, along with the popularity of Locke’s ideas, led to a market for children’s literature in the mid-18th Century. The first publisher to capitalize on this market was John Newberry, who published his *Little Pretty Pocket Book* in 1744.
	5. French Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau was another influential voice in the development of the concept of childhood. He said that children are born innocent, and that their natural curiosity and imagination should be encouraged.
	6. Traditional stories (the folk and fairy tales of the old oral tradition) became the subject of academic research at this time as professors began to collect and publish them. The Grimm brothers, Hans Christian Andersen and other European scholars published hundreds of stories in the early 19th Century.
3. The “Golden Age” of children’s literature
	1. As paper and printing became cheaper in the mid-19th Century there was a shift away from “traditional” stories to more imaginative works written specifically for and often about children.
	2. A perfect example is English author Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. This book was among the first novel-length works written for a child audience and it created the genre that we now call “fantasy”: works that are purely imaginary in nature.
	3. Another British author, Robert Louis Stevenson, published very popular books in what we would now call the “adventure” genre: works that involve incredible and dangerous journeys by intrepid explorers. *Treasure Island*, one such book, involved shipwrecks, pirates, and daring escapes.
	4. In America, Louisa May Alcott published a semi-autobiographical “coming of age” story titled “Little Women.” This type of story was wildly popular and described the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood.
	5. Mark Twain, another American author, wrote books like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, novels that depicted the reality of a child’s life in the American West. These also became wildly popular for children and adults alike.
	6. The Golden Age of children’s literature is said to have ended at the beginning of World War I, with publication of slowing in the period between WWI and WWII for a variety of reasons.