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## Aging in Children's Literature



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### Definition

Children's literature comprises books that are written or adapted by adults for a double audience of children as well as adult readers. It ranges from baby books to young adult literature, and includes not just oral and written fiction, but also poetry and informative works. Children's literature established itself as a special segment of the literary market in the eighteenth century – a development that was strongly influenced by John Locke's pedagogical advice to combine instruction with pleasure (Grenby 2009). Since children's literature plays an important role in the socialization of children, educators and literary scholars are interested in the ideological contexts that the books convey, including their age norms and construction of the ageing process. In recent years, the potential of strengthening intergenerational relationships through books has preoccupied various scholars in the field of children's literature studies, especially in the light of aging populations (Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2018). This entry explores the key roles that older figures play in children's books, including the stereotypes that some books perpetuate, and the attempts in

recent children's literature to broaden younger people's understandings of how old age can be lived.

### Overview

While the focus in most children's books is on young characters, various titles also feature figures in other age categories, and some even have adult protagonists. A classic example of the latter is Mrs. Pepperpot, created by the Norwegian author Alf Prøysen in the 1950s. This older woman can shrink to the size of a pepper pot and then goes on adventures. Like several older figures in children's books, she is particularly kind to animals – a feature they share with many child protagonists. Various Japanese fairy tales and their retellings also feature older characters in prominent roles, as a means to explore larger philosophical, psychological, and existential questions than the more love-driven popular tales of the West that tend to have younger protagonists (Murai 2018). A character's age is not always stable in children's books. Several narratives trace the ageing of characters, such as Harry Potter, who grows up from an 11-year-old boy to an adult in the course of J.K. Rowling's series. In Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958), Tom's younger playmate Hatty and the old Mrs. Bartholomew turn out to be one and the same person. The fantastic mode is more dominant in mainstream and award-winning children's books

than in adult literature, and several age-shifting narratives have been published (Lehtonen 2013). They spur reflections on what it means to be young or old and the (dis)continuity of character traits through different stages in life. Diane Wynne Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986) is a good case in point. Sophie, a young girl, is transformed into an old crone as a form of punishment, but seems to be more comfortable in an older than a younger body.

When older people appear as secondary characters in children's literature, they often function as substitute parents, and the relation between the young and the old is usually cast as loving and mutually reinforcing (Joosen 2018). These books are as diverse as the historical novel *Goodnight Mister Tom* by Michele Magorian (1981), the picture book *The Whales' Song* (1990) by Dyan Sheldon and Gary Blythe, the realist young adult novel *Sherwood Hero* (1995) by Alison Prince, or the magical realist novel *The Book of Everything* (2004) by Guus Kuijer. Written in various genres and published for different age groups, all these narratives have in common that they describe an older person taking care of a child, nourishing it with attention, food, and inspiring stories. Lucy M. Boston's classic series about *The Children of Green Knowe* is another example; it revolves around a boy who spends his vacations with the older Mrs. Oldknow. Her imagination, sense of adventure, and playfulness equal his, and she introduces him to the children of the past that still dwell at the Green Knowe house. Via the older woman, the child gains access to the past. This is a recurrent trope in the depiction of old age in children's books; older figures frequently act as storytellers who bring history to life. Pat Pinsent uses the term "patchwork grandmother" for the older female storyteller, "often seen with a piece of needlework which not infrequently gives them inspiration for recalling family memories" (2001, p. 142). The storytellers can also be male, as is the case in David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), where the teenage protagonist Kit connects with the past of the town to which he has just moved through his grandfather's accounts of the mines and the workers who perished there (Joosen 2015). In Israeli Holocaust literature for young

readers, the grandparents' stories address issues of trauma and memory, which critics suggest may be liberating for all generations (Darr 2012). Finally, older figures in children's literature often serve to introduce young readers to the illness and death of a loved one (Sandler 1991). John Burningham's *Granpa* (1984), for example, describes the friendship between a little girl and her grandfather, until he grows sick and his chair remains empty. In addition, recent books address themes of dementia and euthanasia (van Lierop-Debrauwer 2018).

## Key Research Findings and Examples

### Ageism in Children's Books

Critics from both age studies and children's literature studies have expressed concern about the recurrence of the decline narrative and ageist stereotypes in books for young readers. Sylvia Henneberg (2010, p. 128), for example, criticizes the representation of older women in fairy tales and children's classics, claiming that sexism and ageism reinforce each other in these stories. She finds that the roles for older women are limited to three stereotypes: "the wicked old witch," as for example in the Brothers Grimm's *Hansel and Gretel* (1812), "the selfless godmother," who appears, among others, in Charles Perrault's *Cinderella* (1697), or "the demented hag," as in the Grimms' and Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood* (1812). Henneberg finds that those stereotypes are repeated in popular movies and classic books for children. Cruella De Vil in Disney's *101 Dalmatians* (1996) is a modern incarnation of the evil witch, whereas Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880) features both a self-effacing grandmother in the figure of Frau Sesemann and an ineffectual, weak crone in Peter's unnamed grandmother (Henneberg 2010, p. 130–31).

In addition to these patterns, the "nosy and gossipy old woman" is a stock figure that has a long tradition in literature and the arts (Warner 1994, p. 27–50) and that pops up in, among others, Penelope Lively's *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe*. There, old Mrs. Verity

had lived in Lewisham for a long time and knew about everything: she knew what time the Oxford bus stopped at the corner, where the postman's mother lived, which young man fancied the Vicar's daughter, and where the butcher was going for his holiday. She was, to put it plainly, something of a busybody. And her deepest interest was reserved for those who lived closest to her. She devoted much attention to the Harrisons, trotting up the path at least twice a day. (1973, p. 46)

Her knowledge is not only ridiculed, as she is mostly concerned with trivialities and gossip, but she is shown to be inimical to the young protagonist James when she falsely accuses him of vandalism. The male counterpart to the "nosy old woman" is the "grumpy old man," easily irritated by the noise that children make or the space they claim.

Marilyn Apseloff (1986) has considered children's books in the light of the increased agency of older people. On the one hand, what she calls their "growing militancy" has led to a revision of the stereotypes of weakness and wickedness. On the other hand, Apseloff (1986) notes the emergence of new problematic patterns: "the grandparents' strength is often based on the weakness of others; men (grandfathers and fathers) are often weak or absent altogether; and the consistent portrayal of female strength may be creating another stereotype equally as false as the traditional one" (1986, p. 80). Similarly, Aagje Swinnen (2008) reads Sophie in Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* as embodying the hyperactive senior after she has been transformed into a crone. This figure is associated with the denial of the older body. Indeed, as Swinnen (2008) notes, Sophie is more energetic as an older woman than she was as a teenage girl.

In several children's books that pair a younger and an older character, the latter is described as childlike. Sometimes, they even temporarily transform into a child, as in Kuijer's *Book of Everything*, while *Goodnight Mister Tom* has the young protagonist Will perform the role of an older man during a school play – a part that he can play very well because of his affinity with old age. "Old people are like children" can be considered a root metaphor with a long history that is based on (perceived) similarities between the two

age groups and that also informs the expression "second childhood" for old age. These similarities can range from physical weakness and the need for care to wisdom and moral superiority (Joosen 2018). Jenny Hockey and Allison James (1993; 1995) have addressed the infantilization of older persons as a result of this equation, for example in institutionalized care, when older people are addressed like children and engaged in activities that are reminiscent of (pre)school. However, children's books like *Goodnight Mister Tom*, *The Whales' Song*, *Sherwood Hero*, and *The Book of Everything* cast the young as empowered, intelligent, and sensitive beings and suggest that the equation with childhood is the biggest compliment an adult can receive. They project not the weaknesses, but the supposed strengths of childhood – creativity, fantasy, curiosity – onto old age. The books do not suggest that the older characters have not developed, as they also display experience and responsibility, but that positive traits associated with youth do not need to be lost in old age and that they can form the basis for strong intergenerational relationships.

### Opening Up Diverse Views on Old Age via Children's Books

In books featuring (substitute) grandparents, the stereotype of the "wise old mentor" is particularly pervasive, with an older person inspiring or coming to the aid of the child or adolescent protagonist. The common practice of child narrators and focalizers helps to explain the prevalence of this stereotype to some extent. Maria Nikolajeva (2002) explains how the point of view in children's books affects its representation of adults, referring to Astrid Lindgren's *Karlson on the Roof*:

we must be aware of the narrative perspective of the text. In *Karlson on the Roof*, the mother can be very easily perceived as a stereotype, since she is only portrayed in stereotypical situations: baking cinnamon rolls and making hot chocolate drinks for her son, bandaging his wound after a fight, comforting and caring. However, the narrative is focalized through the young protagonist, and the portrait of the mother is his image of a perfect parent [. . .]. Indeed, we do not know what else Midge's mother

does beside baking rolls, since it is irrelevant for the focalizing character. (p. 115)

Since the fictional child's perspective is created by an adult author, that author can also use it to open up readers' views of adults' lives. Indeed, various children's books have done so, either by giving children insight into the experiences of older people, or by critically addressing children's sense of entitlement to the assistance and care provided by older people. *De regels van drie* (2013, *The rules of three*) by Marjolijn Hof is an example of the former. It shows how a young teenage boy sympathizes with his great grandfather's wish to die in the mountains rather than move to a care center. Their mutual struggle for agency creates a special connection, and together with the protagonist, the reader gets insight into the experiences of an older man who is patronized by his daughter and granddaughter, but insists on his rights as an adult. Loor, the ten-year-old protagonist of Martha Heesen's *De ijzeren hemel* (2004, *The iron heaven*), is an example of the latter strategy, that is, of children's books that critically address children's limited knowledge when it comes to later life. Loor has a special relationship with her grandfather, a widower; they share a shed in which they create all sorts of artistic installations and inventions, which they name and imagine coming to life. Already on the first pages, Loor's claim on her grandfather's attention becomes clear, as she wonders: "Why hadn't Grandpa repaired the puncture in the tire of her bicycle yet?" (Heesen 2004, p. 9, my translation) and knocks on his door with impatience and irritation. Loor cannot imagine that her grandfather has anything better to do than to care for her. This point of view is challenged when the grandfather gets a girlfriend, whom Loor vehemently rejects. She gradually learns that the older man can only be happy if his adult needs for love and sex are also met, and ultimately accepts that there is a part of his life from which she is excluded.

## Prospects

As the interest in intergenerational relationships in children's books is on the rise, and their potential

for fostering intergenerational dialogue is expected, the need for more empirical research is needed. While children's attitudes about old age have been tested, more insight into children's reception of the treatment of (older) age in books is needed to assess the impact of literature on their views. Since adults are mediators and readers of children's books, an empirical exploration of their reception would also be worthwhile. In addition, children's literature's construction of age and the life course in various cultural and historical contexts is still underexplored. Various examples in this article are drawn from Dutch literature, in which a preoccupation with broadening age narratives can be noted since the late twentieth century. Other contexts deserve more specific attention. A detailed exploration of age would benefit from an intersectional approach, to see how age in children's books combines with other markers of identity such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, disability, and social class.

## Summary

Since children's literature plays an important role in the socialization of children, educators and literary scholars are interested in the age norms they convey. More analyses and empirical research are needed to assess this impact. Some children's books have older figures as protagonists, and many feature them as secondary characters. The loving relationship between a child and an older substitute parent is a recurrent theme and sometimes relies on the root metaphor that likens old people to children. While some children's books perpetuate ageist stereotypes such as "the evil witch" and "the wise old mentor," other titles problematize children's limited knowledge of older age and supplement it with richer, more diverse views.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Age Stereotypes Children's Attitudes Toward Aging and Older Adulthood](#)

- ▶ [Decline and Progress Narratives Dementia Narratives Grandparenting](#)
- ▶ [Intergenerational Programs](#)
- ▶ [The Performativity of Age](#)

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