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Making Americans: Children's Literature from 1930 to 1960

Gary D. Schmidt

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American children need books that draw on their own history and circumstances, not just the classic European fairy tales. They need books that enlist them in the great democratic experiment that is the United States. These were the beliefs of many of the authors, illustrators, editors, librarians, and teachers who expanded and transformed children’s book publishing between the 1930s and the 1960s.

Although some later critics have argued that the books published in this era offered a vision of a safe, secure, simple world without injustice or unhappy endings, Gary D. Schmidt shows that the progressive political agenda shared by many Americans who wrote, illustrated, published, and taught children’s books had a powerful effect. Authors like James Daugherty, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Lois Lenski, Ingri and Edgar Parin D’Aulaire, Virginia Lee Burton, Robert McCloskey, and many others addressed directly and indirectly the major social issues of a turbulent time: racism, immigration and assimilation, sexism, poverty, the Great Depression, World War II, the atomic bomb, and the threat of a global cold war.

The central concern that many children’s book authors and illustrators wrestled with was the meaning of America and democracy itself, especially the tension between individual freedoms and community ties. That process produced a flood of books focused on the American experience and intent on defining it in terms of progress toward inclusivity and social justice. Again and again, children’s books addressed racial discrimination and segregation, gender roles, class differences, the fate of Native Americans, immigration and assimilation, war, and the role of the United States in the world. Fiction and nonfiction for children urged them to see these issues as theirs to understand, and in some ways, theirs to resolve. *Making Americans* is a study of a time when the authors and illustrators of children’s books consciously set their eyes on national and international sights, with the hope of bringing the next generation into a sense of full citizenship.

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