

John Newbery, A Children´s Books Pioneer

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Before the publication of *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in 1744, the concept of Children´s Literature did not exist as such, as these books were not classified as important. Stories expressly written for children were out of sight, for texts which adults read could be read by children as well, like fables, ancient myths, folktales, conduct books or pious tales whose aim was to encourage the young ones to behave well, to be industrious and helpful to the poor, in a word, to be instilled in Christian values, as Shirley Granahan observes in *John Newbery, Father of English Literature* (Granahan, 2010). However, most children could not read at that time; those who could, found the language difficult, the topics of the books were not attractive either.

Reading material specifically for children published around 1576, before Newbery´s times, involved primers or first-readers, histories, and hymnbooks whose subject matter focused on religion instruction and knowledge, but in no way intended to amuse. In addition, chapbooks, sold by peddlers on the streets in the city or along roads, were small books consisting of eight and thirty-two pages with texts that included folklore, ballads, jokes, or recipes. As they were unexpensive, they could be bought by the less wealthy and be enjoyed, thus, by adults and children alike (Granahan, 2010), though not designed especially for them.

It was Newbery who wrote and published the first book truly intended for entertainment *as well as* instruction, not just the latter, as Puritan books for children had offered since the seventeenth century, Patrick C. Fleming claims, stating that this is the reason why Newbery deserves to be called The Father of Children´s Literature (Fleming, 2013).

John Newbery, the younger son of a farmer, was born in Waltham St Lawrence, Berkshire, in 1713. He went to London and prospered. Before that, he worked for William Carnan, printer and editor of one of the earliest local newspapers in Reading, *The Reading Mercury*, where he learnt the occupation. He also owned a shop there, The Bible and Crown, where he sold medicines and other goods. On his passing, Carnan left his property and business to his brother, Charles and Newbery, who married his widow, Mary, with whom he had three children: Mary, born in March 1740; John, born in September 1741, who died aged eleven years and Francis, born in July 1743. He was the one who inherited his father business (Welsh, 1885).

In the year 1740, Newbery travelled around England, whose account is preserved in his Private Memorandum Book, in which, apart from different kinds of notes on sights, products, machines or prices of the items he could sell, there are several recipes for medicines, some for private use, others are thought they might be produced when he arrives home (Welsh, 1885).

The Reading Mercury, the book and medicine businesses doing well, Newbery widened his interests opening a Bible and Crown shop in London in 1744, leaving his stepson, John Carnan, in charge of the Reading businesses. All the family moved to 65 St Paul's Churchyard, above the store. The neighbourhood was busy with vendors, book and music shops; yet, the Newberys moved into Canonbury House, in Islington, a building which had been home to literary men and politicians (Granahan, 2010).

Around this time, Newbery met Samuel Johnson through business, probably, and remained friends through life, the same as with Robert James, a doctor and a writer, whose invention, Dr James's Fever Powder, became very popular at the time. Newbery, by contract, had the right to sell the medicine from which he made a good profit. Likewise, he became acquainted with a number of famous writers, including Oliver Goldsmith and Christopher Smart who wrote for his publications and whom Newbery used to help financially with loans as writers were often in debt.

The last twelve years of his life, from 1755 to 1767, appear to have been the most active of his career: his publishing ventures, his medicine business and literary associations were flourishing well. His little books for children were issued around this period, the same as more literary magazines and newspapers, like *The Literary Magazine*, *The Universal Chronicle*, *The British Magazine* or *The Public Ledger*, where essays on politics, literature, morality or humour were found among other issues (Welsh, 1885).

The course of his business was interrupted by an illness from which Newbery never recovered. He passed away on the 22nd of December, 1767 at the age of fifty-four. He was buried in the churchyard in his hometown, Waltham St Lawrence.

"The philanthropic publisher of St Paul's Churchyard," as Oliver Goldsmith had named him (cited in Welsh, 1885), was the first publisher who made the issue of books for children a source of income, starting a flourishing book trade. After the Revolution of 1688, life was becoming more domestic, the middle-class, interested in self-improvement and in the education of children, was expanding, creating the perfect opportunity for Newbery to start his publishing business. Pocket books were in fashion at that time when *A Little Pretty Pocket- Book* (1744), the first book for children, was published.

A Little Pretty Pocket- Book is a compilation of rhymes about games for the young ones written in alphabetical order dealt with the rewards of being good and the punishment for being bad. The text followed John Locke's ideas, who, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), stated that the mind of a child was like a white piece of paper on which experience, sensorial perception, wrote with letters creating, thus, his personal history (Locke, 1693). The best way for children to be attracted to knowledge was through play, that is, entertainment, "Thus children may be cozened into a knowledge of the letters; be taught to read, without perceiving it to be anything but a sport, and play themselves into that others are whipped for." (Locke, 1693, p. 116). Accordingly, this is what Newbery put into practice, as he published pleasurable books which children wanted to read, not just educational tales. The idea that the book should entertain *and* improve the reader's character was a distinguishing feature of the eighteenth-century books for Newbery's

young readers, John Rowe Townsend comments in *John Newbery and his Books* (Townsend, 1994).

As diversion was a better way to lure children into nurturing their own interests, good behaviour, morals, rather than force them to take part in activities they disliked, he innovated and promoted the selling of several books by attaching a complimentary accessory to them, like a pincushion for girls and a ball for boys, in *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* as an incentive to be good.

In the introduction, it is revealed that “THE grand Design in the Nurture of Children, is to make them Strong, Hardy, Healthy, Virtuous, Wise and Happy; and these good Purposes are not to be obtained without some Care and Management in their Infancy”¹ (cited in Manuel, 2015, p.83). These ideas represent Locke’s avant-garde maxims of raising happy, industrious citizens for the improvement of society and the country, notions which The Enlightenment entailed against the traditional puritan books which emphasized discipline and religious faith.

The book comprises a list of boys’ games, activities and sports with an illustration above each poem, and a moral in verse below. Kite-flying, marbles, hoop and hide, fishing, leap frog, or bird nesting, base-ball or swimming are some examples of the games and activities which can be found. Then, comes learning the ABC in rhyme, several fables, the description of the seasons, proverbs and, finally, rules for behaviour at home, at table, when in company, at school, when abroad or among other children.

But the most renowned of Newbery’s children’s books was *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*, an anonymous tale published in 1765, which relates the story of Margery, an orphan, who, together with his little brother, and by her compassionate behaviour to others, piety and industry manages to rise socially and have an education, becoming a quasi-mother and an instructor to poor children, a teacher and a rich widow through hard work and virtue (Manuel 37). It is “not just a story of a young girl’s education, but a larger tale of rebirth through knowledge” (cited in Manuel, 2015, p.35).

Little Goody Two-Shoes, as it was known, was printed at The Bible and Sun, Newbery’s bookshop, in St Paul’s Churchyard, London. The authorship has been attributed to Oliver Goldsmith on the grounds of humour and style and to the brothers Giles and Griffith Jones, without it having been confirmed as such. However, Townsend finds there is no real evidence to support that it was not Newbery himself the author of many of these books (Townsend, 1994). In fact, Welsh claims that these authors, together with Newbery himself, used to produce many popular little books for the instruction and diversion of children at that age (Welsh, 1885).

In the preface to *Giles Gingerbread* (1764) it reads, “Whether you, gentle Reader, were born at my native place, Waltham, where the frogs sing like nightingales, or at any other place, you may be as wise and as honest as I am” (cited in Townsend, 1994, p. 18), which claims Newbery’s authorship. Giles, like most of his characters, is taught the value of obedience, industry, honesty. Every day, his father provides him with ginger letters and books to read for self-improvement.

These texts are simple and clear in intention: goodness means being obedient, dutiful and honest, rising early, saying your prayers, telling no lies. But rewards are not

¹ “Newbery and his contemporaries usually capitalized nouns” (Townsend, 1994, p.xiv).

always material, for if you are truthful, your conscience will be good, as Townsend mentions, adding that “Be good or nobody will love you” is more refined than “ Be good or you will go to hell” (Townsend, 1994, p.15).

Not only was Newbery a pioneer and innovator producing the first children’s periodical, *The Lilliputian Magazine* (1751-52) or regarding the content of the books, but also he started the business of reprinting the titles as many times as demanded. To make the books attractive, Newbery gilded the edges and used Dutch floral paper to differentiate them from the poor look of the chapbooks which were read by children at that time.

I would like to finish this paper by resorting to Newbery’s biographer’s words dedicated to “this worthy man” (Welsh,1885, p.vii), whose books are almost unheard of in our age, not so unknown for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century children’s books lovers. He was the first editor who started a trade from publishing children’s books using marketing strategies, like material rewards, involved in the instruction. Similarly, Newbery promoted his products and bookshop in some texts: Margery’s father had died because he had not taken Dr James’s Fever Powder, as he should have done, and he bound his books beautifully to attract customers to his business. Such an innovative man ahead of his time, Newbery was!

Good fortune is of comparatively little use without hard work, and John Newbery never spared himself. He is another example of what untiring energy, indomitable perseverance, and enthusiastic love of work can do. He sought the right groove for his talents with unremitting zeal, and when he had found it, he applied himself vigorously to work in it. (Welsh, 1885, p. 81)

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