



Walter Scott 1771-1832

Towards an Overview of Scottish Children's Literature from 1823-2010

Jim Allison, *The Bottle Imp*.

Behind Charlotte Square in the New Town of Edinburgh you may come across an ornate Gothic monument commemorating the novelist Catherine Sinclair who died in 1864. An inscription added in 1900 declares:

5 She was a friend of all children and through her book 'Holiday House' speaks to them still.

10 *Holiday House—a Book for the Young*, published in 1839, makes a notable starting point for a survey of Scottish children's literature. Previously there had been nothing quite like it in its portrayal of juvenile behaviour. The particular milieu, lightly sketched, is bourgeois Edinburgh and its rural environs; the main protagonists are a brother and sister, perhaps 5 or 6 years old, and its episodic narrative deals with their alarming reactions to the adult world. While it has a moralising framework and mortality latterly intrudes, the book's life lies in the anarchic, exploratory efforts of Harry and Laura, who are, quite simply, not safe to be left. Beguilingly articulate, they are the innocents from Hell. Adult attempts to discipline them veer between vicious beatings from their nursery-maid, and saintly tolerance on the part of their long-suffering guardians.

25 Along with Walter Scott's first series of *Tales of a Grandfather* (1828), *Holiday House* makes a rare direct bid for the imaginations of its young readers. Of Scott, John Buchan records that when six-year-old Johnnie Lockhart first encountered his grandfather's *Tales*

DID YOU KNOW...?

Walter Scott wrote *Tales of a Grandfather* for his grandson, John Hugh Lockhart.

In the book, Scott told the story of Scotland's history in language that was easy for children to understand.

Scott had always been interested in Scottish history. His poems and novels were often about important moments from the past.

What stories did you enjoy when you were young?

What were the characters like?

In your opinion, what is the best way of studying history?



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30 "he was properly excited by it all and set out to dirk his young brother with a pair of scissors." This is very much the same world as *Holiday House*. Mischievously for the purposes of this brief overview we shall garland the forgotten Miss Sinclair as Scotland's first children's laureate.

35 "I wish everybody who writes a book was obliged to swallow it," said Harry. "It is such a waste of time reading, when we might be amusing ourselves."

40 Since Margaret Meek produced her seminal collection of essays *The Cool Web* in 1977, the field of children's literature, from infant board books to teenage crossover fiction, has grown its own formal critical apparatus. Internationally there is now an immense volume of scholarly theorising by and for literary critics, teachers and librarians on issues such as: aesthetic quality and canonicity; genres and categories; interactions between author and reader; enjoyment and instruction; developmental and reading ages; gender, ethnicity, postcolonial, feminist and other ideologies; and not least the motives and economics of the book trades and professional authors. A recent and readable survey of this sometimes rebarbative material is to be found in the Open University's *Children's Literature: Approaches and Territories*.

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DID YOU KNOW...?

Walter Scott was a Scottish writer who lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

When he was a young man, he was interested in traditional ballads, and published a collection of them.

He then became famous for writing poetry. He finally moved onto writing novels. Have you read *Ivanhoe* or *Waverley*?

Can you think of any famous writers?

Why do you think their work is popular?

What interests do you have now?

What do you think you will do with them in the future?



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Questions

Understanding Questions:

1. Look at lines 1-10. According to the inscription from 1900, how does Catherine Sinclair communicate with children?
2. In your own words, what is the 'particular milieu' (line 12) of *The Holiday House*?
3. What does 'makes a rare direct bid for the imagination of its young readers' (lines 25-26) mean?
4. Look at lines 24-29. In your own words, what did Johnnie Lockhart do when he first read *Tales of a Grandfather*?
5. Look at lines 30-32. Was Catherine Sinclair really the children's laureate? Explain your answer.
6. Look at lines 34-36. Does Harry in *The Holiday House* like reading?
7. Look at lines 41-50. Name three of the things that people have studied in relation to children's literature.

Analysis Questions:

1. Explain how the first sentence is an effective opening of the article.
2. Find one example of effective word choice in the first paragraph (lines 1-22). Explain why it is effective.
3. What is the effect of the parenthetical 'quite simply' on line 18?
4. Find one example of effective word choice in the sentence that starts 'Mischievously...' (line 30). Explain why your chosen word is effective.
5. Find one example of effective sentence structure in the final paragraph (lines 38-50). What makes it effective?

Discussion Questions:

- How do you think children's literature has changed over time?
- Do you think it is important that children's literature has realistic characters?
- Do you think children's literature should teach moral lessons?
- If you were to write a children's book, what would it be about?



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Answers

Understanding Questions:

8. Through her book.
9. Any gloss of 'bourgeois Edinburgh and its rural environs' e.g. middle-class Edinburgh and the countryside around it.
10. Unusually for the time, it was written for children.
11. He tried to stab his brother.
12. No, because the writer says they will make her the laureate just for this article.
13. No.
14. Any three of the following: aesthetic quality and canonicity; genres and categories; interactions between author and reader; enjoyment and instruction; developmental and reading ages; gender, ethnicity, postcolonial, feminist and other ideologies; the motives and economics of the book trades and professional authors.

Analysis Questions:

1. Answers could include: it highlights the importance of Sinclair because there is an ornate monument in her honour; 1864 tells us that Scottish children's literature has a long history; it sets the context of Edinburgh by specifying a specific monument.
2. Pupils' own choices. Possibilities include: 'anarchic', (just as anarchic suggests that there are no rules or regulations, so too do the children not follow any orders), 'beguilingly' (as beguilingly means that something is charmingly deceptive, this suggests that the children seem charming even though they are terrors).
3. Pupils' own choice. Possible answers include: it makes the passage conversational; it understates the following statement (that they are not safe to be left), which adds humour.
4. Pupils' own choice. Possible answers include: 'garland', which makes the reader imagine Sinclair being crowned with a wreath crown; 'forgotten', which suggests that she has unfairly overlooked.
5. Pupils' own choice. Possible answer includes the long list that implies children's literature has been studied a lot.