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**Trends in Children's Fiction in the United Kingdom During the 1980s**

*Through her work on Children's Books of the Year Julia Eccleshare has a unique overview of the development of fiction written for children during the 1980s. CLE invited her to detect trends in the writing and publishing of children's books during the past decade.*

Children's literature—children's books. Is there really a great divide between the two, and if so, what is it?

The debate between these two positions has long raged and is especially relevant in a period of changing publishing approaches. The single growth area in publishing in recent years has been children's paperbacks. There are both more titles being published and more of them being sold. So while the 1980s may not have been a great decade for children's *literature*, the kind of high-quality writing which marked the children's books of the sixties and seventies and made them "modern classics," it was an excellent decade for children's *reading*.

Times have changed and the kind of children's books that were published in the 1980s inevitably reflect a changing economic background and, increasingly as we move into the 1990s, a massive change in our educational structure at all levels from learning to read to literature read at all ages of schooling.

Children's books are now too important financially to publishing houses to be allowed to be as independent and therefore as original as they were in the preceding decades. They are in the mainstream of publishing—with the many attendant advantages that that brings but
also with the disadvantage that they must be first, foremost, and powerfully money-makers. With the laying down of the National Curriculum throughout England and Wales, there is now an even more clearly perceived market for children's books; as an entity they have enormous room to flourish but with the frightening underlying philosophy that they will be market-led. Already, publishers are falling over themselves to publish for the attainment targets, for the key stages prescribed by the National Curriculum—for the teachers who are so short of time that they will no longer be able to choose individual titles because they reinforce or extend the literary experience of a group of readers, or because they air feelings or issues which happen to be appropriate for a class at a particular time, or because they provide just the right general background for a particular topic. Instead, teachers will be buying the heavily marketed and targeted books that may well fall short in literary measure, however rich in "relevance" they may be.

And thereby hangs an old debate that raged through the seventies and left its legacy to the eighties. Rightly, it was identified in the seventies that children's books signally failed to reflect the society in which children were growing up. (The debate as to whether books should or do reflect or guide society can never be happily resolved.) The specific issues were racism and sexism, but underlying both and underlying the debate and subsequent tack of children's publishing was a challenge to the previously accepted view that children's books were "literature" (the position they had so successfully secured for themselves in the 1960s and early 1970s), appealing primarily to a "literate" and pervasively middle-class readership.

Racism and sexism have gradually and successfully—albeit sometimes rather crudely—been edited out of children's fiction. The Other Award, established in 1975 (and, interestingly, abandoned in 1987 because it no longer had a sensible function) to reward books which took positive steps along this road while maintaining the highest standards of writing and illustration, selected an impressive list of books from Jean MacGibbon's *Hal* in 1975, one of the earliest winners, to Catherine Sefton's *Starry Night* in 1986, Geraldine Kaye's *Comfort Herself* in 1985, and Robert Swindells's *Brother in the Land* in 1984. Sadly, these books did not reflect what has been happening to too many of the books which were published under the same guiding principle but without the all-important literary hallmark. Despite the rapid and now terminal decline of the library market, it was librarians in the 1970s who became the arbiters of what children should read. In the move away from an elitist view of children's books the librarians could claim, with some justification, to be the ones who knew what children really wanted to read. From this un-