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Literary news about children's and young people's literature in lletrA, the UOC's virtual space devoted to Catalan Literature

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Children's and Young People's Literature

David Madueño

The creation of a literature generically conceived for an audience of children and young people is a recent phenomenon. The new psychological and educational theories of the twentieth century see childhood and adolescence as stages that are distinct from adult life. The school, space for an individual's development along the road to adulthood, uses the text book as an element that conveys knowledge. The book, then, becomes an educational tool created to codify the most appropriate content through writing and reading. Again, literary reading has managed to find its way into the schoolroom and to become considered as a fundamental part of learning for young children and adolescents with its contribution of dealing with universal themes and, in particular, pleasure in aesthetic values. Literature becomes an enjoyable and also personal and creative activity, requiring of the reader an involvement in the imaginative re-creation of its contents. Finally, the young child and adolescent exercise their critical faculties *vis-à-vis* the text, a skill arising from the incipient capacity for abstraction that will characterise them as adults.

The first steps in the search for appropriate texts for the youngest readers go back to the nineteenth century, in particular to the new rationalist approaches in the sphere of education. The spirit of the romantics and their work in recovering popular folklore was the main fount of resources for these early readings. Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm, along with many others, set about retrieving and writing up texts – folktales, stories and songs – from the oral tradition. This kind of storytelling is highly standardised with clear moral and didactic content. A simple structure facilitated transmission and a growing popularity so that these stories quickly became a tool for entertainment and learning. At the same time, certain works of European literature, while they were not addressed to any particular readership, were very successful among younger readers. The adventure story (Robert Louis Stevenson, Jules Verne, Alexandre Dumas) and the modern tale (Lewis Carroll, Carlo Collodi, J.M. Barrie) are the more outstanding genres and some of these books (*Treasure Island*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Three Musketeers*, for example) were to become classics that went into many editions in collections for young people. In no case are these works lacking in literary merit, but the fantastic elements of the genre and the structure of the initiatory journey – as metaphor for the stages the young person goes through on the way to maturity – were sufficient in themselves to make these books appealing to a younger readership. Again, these novels are based on historical settings and scientific and cultural knowledge, and thus conveyed information from these fields under the pretext of the pleasure of reading.

However, the concept of a branch of literature specifically addressed to children and adolescents was a phenomenon that characterised the twentieth century. The social changes that came with industrialisation, a different social model that advocated schooling as a right for all and the appearance of new ideological and pedagogical trends stimulated interest in producing texts that responded to the needs and possibilities of readers. Although fantasy and adventure were still recurring, sought-after genres, even though they were not exclusively aimed at young readers – Michael Ende, Roald Dahl, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, J.R.R. Tolkein – historical and social changes coming about with the Second World War, urban marginality and racial conflict gave rise to the current of critical realism. The genres of "adult" literature were adapted and reinterpreted with children and adolescents in mind. Hence, young readers learned to understand the world for themselves at the same time as they were taking as their literary references texts that, in their codification, would to prepare them, in due course, for embarking on more demanding reading.

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The First Initiatives in Catalonia

In 1899 the Associació Protectora de l'Ensenyança Catalana (Association for the Protection of Catalan Teaching) was founded, this being one of the earliest manifestations of interest in the educational sector shaped by the winds of renovation in Europe. The folktale, which was recovered in the nineteenth-century [Renaixença](#) – the early nineteenth-century romantic revivalist movement in Catalan language and culture – became the model par excellence for children's literature. A few years later, [Josep Maria Folch i Torres](#) founded the magazine *En Patufet*, a leading light in Catalonia in its way of conceiving a very specific kind of children's literature.

On the basis of literary and cultural populism, Folch advanced a moral model based on tradition through novelised stories that adopted the genre of European adventure tales (for example *Les extraordinàries aventures d'en Massagran* [The Extraordinary Adventures of Toobig]) and plays based on Catalan folklore, among which the most significant would certainly be his nativity play, *Els pastorets* [The Little Shepherds]. The success of his endeavours encouraged Folch i Torres to set up a "Biblioteca Patufet" (Children's Library) collection in which all kinds of Catalan and European stories for children were published. The market would then be constructed along the lines established by Folch i Torres with initiatives such as "La rondalla de dijous" [The Thursday Story] or the Mallorcan folktales collected by Monsignor Antoni M. Alcover.

The constitution of the Mancomunitat of Catalonia [the political union of the four provincial governments of Barcelona, Girona, Tarragona and Lleida] represented a step ahead in education and in popularising reading. A Network of Libraries was established along with a librarians' school and a collection called "Llibres per a servir de lectura a les escoles de Catalunya" [Books for Reading in the Schools of Catalonia]. Enric Prat de la Riba, the first president of the Mancomunitat, brought together around his own figure the [Noucentista](#) [an early twentieth-century politico-cultural trend in the service of bourgeois reformism] intellectual group led by [Josep Carner](#) and [Eugeni d'Ors](#) in order to foster, all around Catalonia and at all levels, a fixed and quite well-documented project for the country as a whole. Its traces may be found in the ideological programme of Noucentista literature, which was understood as just one more branch in the construction of a modern Catalonia to be carried out on the basis of a highly-determined aesthetic, political and social model. All the work done by the Mancomunitat, however, foundered with the Primo de Rivera dictatorship after 1923, the effects of which can be seen in the swift disappearance of certain publishing projects: the texts of Josep Carner and [Carles Riba](#) brought out by the Editorial Muntanola in very painstakingly produced editions, profusely illustrated by [Lola Anglada](#), Xavier Nogués and Joan Junceda, among others; the translation of children's classics into Catalan produced by the Editorial Catalana; the magazine *Mainada*, a response to the populist tone of *En Patufet*, with miniature stories by [Joan Salvat-Papasseit](#); the magazine *Violet*, published by Folch i Torres who was seeking a more demanding literary level and who counted on Josep Carner, Carles Riba, [Joaquim Ruyra](#) and Carles Soldevila among his writers.

In 1931, with the proclamation of the Republic, the Generalitat took over the Catalan Mancomunitat government. The Statute of Catalonia, approved in 1932, provided the legal framework within which to organise Catalonia's autonomy at all levels. In the field of education, the Ministry of Culture of the Generalitat took charge of the task of publishing didactic texts in Catalan. Publishing endeavours were now more specifically aimed at the sphere of education. The Editorial Juventut, however, opted clearly for producing translations of children's books that were triumphing in Europe at the time: Arthur Rackham's *The Arthur Rackham Fairy Book*, J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio*.

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As in any other area of Catalan culture, the publication of works for children and adolescents came to an abrupt and categorical end with the Civil War and the subsequent Franco dictatorship. After 1946 the Franco regime showed cautious permissiveness regarding the publication in Catalan of texts deemed suitable by the censors, these including new editions of the most successful novels published by Folch i Torres; the "Rondalles" collection of stories of the Editorial Ariel (four volumes of popular stories illustrated by Elvira Elias and Montserrat Casanova); and the re-edition, by [Editorial Selecta](#), of the classics for young people that had been published by the now-defunct Editorial Catalana. In Valencia, Enric Valor published *Rondalles valencianes* [Stories from Valencia].

Recovery in the 1960s

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, the Franco regime made no bones about its plans regarding the suppression of Catalan language and culture. The publishers took advantage of fissures that were now starting to appear in the system to resume the task of regular publication in the Catalan language. The field of children's and young people's literature, starting with the Catalan schools, was to benefit from a rethinking of the project and the modernising thrust coming in from Europe. Parents and teachers organised a movement rejecting the regime's centralist and totalitarian educational model, proposing instead educational renovation in the schools based on the new European pedagogical and social trends. In practice, however, the standard use of Catalan as the language of schooling was not to come about until the fall of the dictatorial model and the establishment of a democratic political system. Meanwhile, all efforts to publish books for children and adolescents in Catalan were based on three initiatives: the publication in 1961 of the magazine *Cavall Fort*, which brought together the future professionals of the publishing world of children's and young people's books; the founding of the publishing house La Galera; and the creation of the Josep M. Folch i Torres and Joaquim Ruyra prizes for children's literature.

The new literary proposals left behind the children's-story model of earlier decades to set out on a project of thematic and stylistic renewal based on a reformulation of "adult" books adapted for children and adolescents: the crime novel, the historical novel and critical realism. All of this facilitated an approximation to literature by a potential public that had been drastically reduced by an educational system in Spanish and the regime's prohibition of publications in Catalan.

El zoo d'en Pitús [Pitús' Zoo] by Sebastià Sorribas, winner of the Folch i Torres Prize, was to become a veritable publishing phenomenon in the years of recovery. The novel applies the "gang of kids" model used by Enid Blyton to describe how a group of children organise a zoo in their neighbourhood. Hence Sorribas' book turned a children's game into a paradigm of solidarity and awareness, a formula that had much to do with the success of his book.

The adventure novel also cut a swathe with the contributions of [Joaquim Carbó](#). Present-day writers such as Pau Joan Hernández and Rafael Vallbona consider that his book *La casa sota la sorra* [The House under the Sand] is one of the best Catalan novels for young people and see it as the spur that started them writing for adolescents themselves. Carbo's plots are vibrant and colourful, with a taste for the exotic while also expressing ecological values. They have given rise to a series of comic strip adaptations of his novels, continuing the story of *La casa sota la sorra* with such titles as *El país d'en Fullaraca* [Fullaraca's Country] (1979), *Els bruixots de Kibor* [The Magic Men of Kibor] (1981) and *La casa sobre el gel* [The House on Ice] (1982).

Not to be overlooked either is another pioneer of the genre, [Josep Vallverdú](#), winner of the 1963 Joaquim Ruyra Prize with his *Trampa sota les aigües* [Trap under the Water]. His novel *Un cavall*

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contra Roma [A Horse against Rome] (1975) was one of the earliest initiatives of bringing the historic context into the genre of adventure stories, a clearly successful endeavour that would encourage other writers. The late Middle Ages in Catalonia were dealt with by [Emili Teixidor](#) in *L'ocell de foc* [The Fire Bird] (1971), while the war of independence is the subject of [Jaume Cabré's](#) *La història que en Roc Pons no coneixia* [The History Roc Pons Didn't Know] (1980).

Notwithstanding the success of these books, more modern works were soon to appear, introducing from the realm of fiction elements of reflection on reality. There is no doubt that one of the all-time successes of Catalan literature for young people is [Manuel de Pedrolo's](#) *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* [Manuscript of the Second Origin] (1974), of which hundreds of thousands of copies have been sold. Coming under the heading of science fiction, Pedrolo's book describes how a young boy and girl, the only survivors of the human species, respond to their dramatic change of circumstances. Their experiences and thoughts on their predicament introduce a critical standpoint with regard to ecology and social relations.

The crime novel, apart from constituting a more updated and urban side of the adventure genre, also makes it possible to introduce social criticism. One precursor is Joaquim Carbó's parody on the archetypical private eye, *Felip Marlot* (1979). However, the real irruption of the crime novel as a genre for young people was to come with *No demanis llobarro fora de temporada* [Don't Ask for Sea Perch out of Season] (1897) by Andreu Martín and Jaume Ribera. Nimble, direct storytelling is nurtured by a depiction of the humble milieus of the city in which the main characters move. The investigations of a young man nick-named "Flanagan", who loves private eye films, unintentionally set off a dangerous spiral of family problems, petty crime and, in the end, blackmail and pederasty. This book's success had the authors continuing with a whole series recounting the predicaments Flanagan gets into.

Realism, then, made a forceful entry on to the scene in these years. The problems of young people are approached from the points of view of readers, using innovative techniques, for example fragmentation of narrative discourse, diaries and psychological perspectives. Gemma Lienas with her book *Cul de sac* (1986), which introduces the problem of drugs, and *Així és la vida, Carlota* [Life's Like That, Carlota] (1989), and Mercè Company, with *La imbècil* [The Imbecile] (1986), pave the way for these socially-aware books for young people, which have accumulated a great number of titles over the years. Their particular features have led to their being dubbed "high-school novels", and also to the fact of their coming to comprise one of the most popular genres of literature for adolescents, not only in Catalonia but throughout Europe. One of the most prolific authors of this kind of Catalan realist novel is Jordi Sierra i Fabra.

Fantasy is still a genre of interest for writers of children's and young people's books, although with reformulations along the lines of fantastic realism, in the narrative style of [Pere Calders](#). Mercè Canela goes back to the forms of the popular story with her *Les set enigmas de l'Iris* [Iris' Seven Enigmas] (1984), after which, starting out from Anglo-Saxon-style fantasy, she wrote *El cercle d'Ouroboros* [The Circle of Ouroboros] (1992). A notable characteristic of the work of Miquel Obiols is his resort to the absurd, as in *Ai Filomena, Filomena!* (1977). Pep Albanell, sometimes using the pen name of Joles Sennell, tends to fantastic realism and experimentalism with his *La guia fantàstica* [The Fantastic Guide] (1977), although he mixes this with psychological and sentimental probing of his characters in *El barcelonata* [The Barcelonaut] (1976) and *Dolor de la rosa* [Pain of the Rose] (1984). Whatever the case, these and other writers present reality through new narrative prisms, taking pleasure in literary play and irony and enjoying considerable success.

Despite all the difficulties, the production of children's and young people's literature has consolidated

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and eventually increased with the appearance of new publishing houses. Notable here is Cruïlla (with its collection "El Vaixell de Vapor"), along with Edicions de Magrana (with the young people's collection "L'Esparver") and Empúries. Moreover, from the pages of the Catalan-language newspaper *Avui*, critics like Teresa Colomer, Caterina Valriu and Andreu Sotorra have offered the indispensable studies, although without much echo in the press. The notable exception here is *Faristol*, a magazine specialising in literature for children and adolescents.

After the recovery of the 1960s and retrieval of a readership, Catalan literature for children and young people now faces the challenge of sustained growth and interest in discerning between quantity and quality in favour of the latter. In this regard, the Congress of Catalan Literature for Children and Young People, which has been held since 1997, has been gathering the views of different professionals in the field.

Theatre and Poetry

The novel has been the genre par excellence for younger readers. Nonetheless, the proposals in the domains of theatre and poetry are also worthy of attention.

For all the endeavours of Noucentisme, poetry has not yet covered enough ground to produce mature proposals and to train younger readers in the habit of reading poetry. Notable exceptions, however, are *Museu zoològic* [Zoological Museum] (1963) and *Bestiari* [Bestiary] (1964) by Josep Carner; *Espígol blau* [Lavender's Blue] (1980), a collection of traditional English traditional poems, translated by [Marià Manent](#); *Marina* (1986) by Olga Xirinacs; *Bon profit!* [Enjoy Your Meal!] (1986) by [Miquel Martí i Pol](#); and *Música, mestre!* [Music, Maestro!] (1987) by Miquel Desclot, the latter three books of poems being published by the short-lived "La Poma Verda" collection of the publishing house Empúries. In 2003, following in the footsteps of this initiative, Cruïlla embarked on a poetry collection called "Vull llegir poesia" [I Want to Read Poetry], which recovers works by classic authors aimed at beginner readers, for example *El cargol* [The Snail] by Josep Carner, *Barques de paper* [Paper Boats] by [Salvador Espriu](#), and *El sol es pon* [The Sun Sets] by [Narcís Comadira](#).

Theatre has struck deeper roots among young people. There is no doubt that, whether the actors are adults or the children themselves, this is a very interesting recreational tool. Catalan culture has considerable projection through theatre in initiatives coming from the general public and promoted by amateur groups. Josep Maria Folch i Torres was the most prolific author of plays for young people, most notably with his work *Els pastorets*. Also outstanding is *El retaule del flautista* [The Tableau of the Flautist] (1970) by Jordi Teixidor. More recent endeavours, however, are quite diverse. They include theatre collections ("Teatre Edebé" and "Taller de Teatre de La Galera"); adaptations of classics, for example *El cavaller Tirant* [The Knight Tirant] (1971) by [Maria Aurèlia Capmany](#) and *El màgic d'Oz* [The Wizard of Oz] (1981) by Francesc Alborch; theatre groups such as Claca, Ara va de bo, Cucorba, Comediants; puppet shows and pantomime, amateur theatre groups and, finally, among other initiatives, the Cavall Fort Theatre Festival.

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bio-bibliography

comments

sites

 **WEB: Dictionary of authors of literature for children and young people in Catalan**

By Josep Maria Aloy Bosch and Eugènia Morer Serra with illustrations by Rosa Mut Carbasa and commissioned by ClijCAT.

<http://www.clijcat.cat/diccionari/idioma.html>

essays

 **WEB: The children and youth books in Joventut publishing (1923-1969)**

Doctoral thesis by Mònica Baró (UB 2005).

<http://tdx.cat/handle/10803/761>

 **WEB: Gretel**

Research group about literature for children and young people and literary education.

<http://literatura.gretel.cat/>

authors

some authors of literature for children and adolescents

 **WEB: Pep Albanell**

<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/albanellp/>

 **WEB: Lola Anglada**

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/autora/lola-anglada>

 **WEB: Mercè Canela**

<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/canelam/index.php>

 **WEB: Josep-Francesc Delgado**

<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/delgadojf/>

 **WEB: Joaquim Carbó**

<http://www.lletra.net/en/author/joaquim-carbo>

 **WEB: Josep M. Folch i Torres**

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 **WEB: Pau Joan Hernández**

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 **WEB: Gemma Lienas**

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<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/lienasm/>



WEB: Miquel Obiols

<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/obiolsm/>



WEB: Joana Raspall

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/autor/joana-raspall>



WEB: Miquel Rayó

<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/rayom/>



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WEB: Sebastià Sorribas

<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/sorribasse/>



WEB: Andreu Sotorra

<http://www.andreusotorra.com/>



WEB: Emili Teixidor

<http://www.lletra.net/en/author/emili-teixidor>



WEB: Jordi Teixidor

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WEB: Josep Vallverdú

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WEB: Oriol Vergés

<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/vergeso/>