



# To See the Wizard: Politics and the Literature of Childhood

By Laurie Ousley

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## To See the Wizard: Politics and the Literature of Childhood By Laurie Ousley

To See the Wizard: Politics and the Literature of Childhood takes its central premise, as the title indicates, from L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Upon their return to The Emerald City after killing the Wicked Witch of the West, the task the Wizard assigned them, Dorothy, the Tin Woodman, Scarecrow, and Lion learn that the wizard is a humbug, merely a man from Nebraska manipulating them and the citizens of both the Emerald City and of Oz from behind a screen. Yet they all continue to believe in the powers they know he does not have, still insisting he grant their wishes. The image of the man behind the screen and the reader's continued pursuit of the Wizard is a powerful one that has at its core an issue central to the study of children's literature: the relationship between the adult writer and the child reader. As Jack Zipes, Perry Nodelman, Daniel Hade, Jacqueline Rose, and many others point out, before the literature for children and young adults actually reaches these intended readers, it has been mediated by many and diverse cultural, social, political, psychological, and economic forces. These forces occasionally work purposefully in an attempt to consciously socialize or empower, training the reader into a particular identity or way of viewing the world, by one who considers him or herself an advocate for children. Obviously, these wizards acting in literature can be the writers themselves, but they can also be the publishers, corporations, school boards, teachers, librarians, literary critics, and parents, and these advocates can be conservative, progressive, or any gradation in between. It is the purpose of this volume to interrogate the politics and the political powers at work in literature for children and young adults. Childhood is an important site of political debate, and children often the victims or beneficiaries of adult uses of power; one would be hard-pressed to find a category of literature more contested than that written for children and adolescents. Peter Hunt writes in his introduction to *Understanding Children's Literature*, that children's books are overtly important educationally and commercially with consequences across the culture, from language to politics: most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority in positions of power and influence, read children's books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development. If there were a question about the central position literature for children and young adults has in political contests, one needs to look no further than the myriad

struggles surrounding censorship. Mark I. West observes, for instance, Throughout the history of children's literature, the people who have tried to censor children's books, for all their ideological differences, share a rather romantic view about the power of books. They believe, or at least they profess to believe, that books are such a major influence in the formation of children's values and attitudes that adults need to monitor every word that children read. Because childhood and young-adulthood are the sites of political debate for issues ranging from civil rights and racism to the construction and definition of the family, indoctrinating children into or subverting national and religious ideologies, the literature of childhood bears consciously political analysis, asking how socialization works, how children and young adults learn of social, cultural and political expectations, as well as how literature can propose means of fighting those structures. *To See the Wizard: Politics and the Literature of Childhood* intends to offer analysis of the political content and context of literature written for and about children and young adults. The essays included in *To See the Wizard* analyze nine

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"...this book provides a number of lively and interesting chapters investigating how adults assert their power in the world of children's literature...many of the points made within this book are relevant and important to a wider world of children's literature criticism." Julie Anastasia Barton, University of East Anglia, in the International Research Society for Children's Literature Journal, January 2010

#### About the Author

Laurie Ousley is Associate Professor and Director of Liberal Arts at Trocaire College in Buffalo, NY. She has recently published in *Legacy*, and has an essay forthcoming in *Mother Knows Best: Talking Back to Baby Experts*. She is currently at work on a study of the political intentions and contexts of literature for young readers from the nineteenth century to the present.

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