

**Jonathan Todres and Sarah Higinbotham's
*Human Rights in Children's Literature:
Imagination and the Narrative of Law (2015)***

Review

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In the foreword, Carol Bellamy, former Executive Director of UNICEF reminds the reader of two relevant and important factors in this text: firstly, that the U.N. Convention of the Rights of a Child (CRC) is now over twenty-five years old (it came into force 2 September 1990) and secondly, that “Children’s literature has a pivotal role to play in forging that early sense of self-worth” (xii). Bellamy believes that values are, and always have been, instilled in children via the means of storytelling, and that children’s worlds are shaped by the words and content of children’s literature. Bellamy congratulates Todres and Higinbotham on bringing into focus the important role that children’s literature plays in the propagation of children’s rights. This is exactly what this engaging, informative, and very readable text does.

In the preface to the book, Jonathan Todres explains that his inspiration for the project initially came from Dr. Seuss’s *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954) and the line: “A person’s a person, no matter how small” (Todres xv). In his research on children’s rights laws, he claims nowhere better describes the key principles of human rights – “dignity, equality, nondiscrimination” than Seuss does here. Todres went on to discover many children’s stories that covered or considered human rights themes, some of which supported concepts of human rights and some which seemed to disregard them altogether. Three additional ideas convinced him of the importance of this project: 1) The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and the importance of making these rights known to everyone (most importantly to children); 2) Considering how these rights make a difference to individual

children and how children's books educate children about their rights and the rights of others; and, finally, 3) Literary theory shows that stories have a bigger (more profound) impact on a child than non-fiction does. He wanted to bring together "children's rights law, children's literature, human rights theory, human rights education research, and literary theory", whilst hoping that the work would "contribute to the creation of a more rights-respecting culture" (xvi).

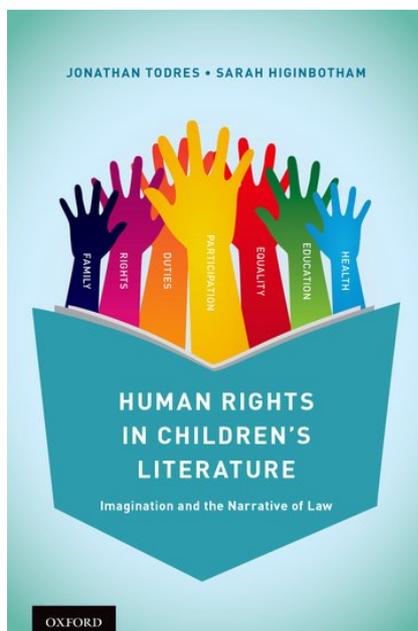
Each chapter refers to a different aspect of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child: "Making Children's Rights Widely Known"; "Participation Rights and the Voice of the Child"; "Confronting Discrimination, Pursuing Equality"; "Identity Rights and Family Rights"; "Civil and Political Rights of Children: Accountability with Dignity"; "Securing Child Well-being: The Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of the Child"; Adults in the World of Children's Literature"; and "Reading, Rights, and the Best Interests of the Child". The book includes four appendices: the first is the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child; the second lists fifty plus definitions of discrimination against children, put forward by the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child; the third appendix is a selection of different versions of the Cinderella tale from all over the world, and the fourth appendix provides details of the empirical study conducted by the authors.

The text is informed by an empirical study conducted by Higinbotham and Todres in the metro Atlanta area (U.S.), entitled: "How Children Interpret Human Rights in Stories" (cf. Appendix 4). In the study the researchers read and discussed books with over 75 children from a variety of backgrounds, sexes, races, ethnicities, and aged between 4 and 17. The books were all popular children's stories, for example: *Yertle the Turtle*, *The Sneetches*, and *Horton Hears a Who!* by Dr. Seuss, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, and *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* by Doreen Cronin and Betsey Lewin. The key research questions were: "How do children's books shape their perception of rights and responsibilities?" and "In what ways do children talk about concepts that we would call 'law,' 'rights,' and 'duties' in their favorite books?" (243). According to the authors, the study "provided children an opportunity to explain [...] how [they] receive, interpret, and internalize their rights and responsibilities through the stories they read and have read to them" (8). The literature covered in the empirical study and in the analysis conducted by Higinbotham and Todres throughout is Anglo-American, and the children involved were from the United States. However, they do emphasise that this is a preliminary study in the field of human rights in children's literature and hope that further studies will be undertaken that cover other literature.

An interesting point made early on in the text, is that children historically have been a marginalised and repressed group and that "their voices, concerns,

and needs have been slighted in the interest of those with more power and more capital” (4). Since the CRC came into force in 1990, the way that Western society sees and deals with children is shifting, one way in which we can see this shift is in the type and content of children’s literature titles being published and in the theory that addresses them. For example, children’s literature theory by scholars Maria Nikolajeva (2009) and Clémentine Beauvais (2015) exploring the agency of the child reader would make good reading companions to this text.

This book examines how ideas about children’s rights are disseminated through children’s literature and how important this is to children’s self-worth. Chapter by chapter it covers the main tenets of the CRC using children’s literature texts to illustrate each one, and observes how children’s literature in general has changed over time from stories where children have few rights (if any), to stories actively championing the rights of the child.



WORKS CITED

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