



## Wild Things! Acts of Mischief in Children's Literature

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**Wild Things! Acts of Mischief in Children's Literature** Betsy Bird , Julie Danielson , Peter Sieruta  
Secret lives, scandalous turns, and some very funny surprises — these essays by leading kids' lit bloggers take us behind the scenes of many much-loved children's books.

Did Laura Ingalls cross paths with a band of mass murderers? Why was a Garth Williams bunny tale dubbed "integrationist propaganda"? For adults who are curious about children's books and their creators, here are the little-known stories behind the stories. A treasure trove of information for a student, librarian, new parent, or anyone wondering about the post-Harry Potter book biz, *Wild Things!* draws on the combined knowledge and research of three respected and popular librarian-bloggers. Told in affectionate and lively prose, with numerous never-before-collected anecdotes, this book chronicles some of the feuds and fights, errors and secret messages found in children's books and brings contemporary illumination to the warm-and-fuzzy bunny world we think we know.

## Wild Things! Acts of Mischief in Children's Literature Details

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## From Reader Review Wild Things! Acts of Mischief in Children's Literature for online ebook

### John says

I was hoping this would be more about dishing (Wanda Gag's diary: "We would quote some more of the passages for you, but the pages of this book might ignite." Dang, guys! It's evil to tease like that!) and less about Issues...but there's still sufficient scandal threaded through the moral and social ruminations to keep things lively. I did see a contradiction in all the mocking of pundits and librarians who object(ed) to language, character types, violence or values in children's books that seemed immoral or dangerous to them, or at the time (and how many of those protests actually came to anything?)—but then a little later sounding a clarion warning about "celebrity books," quoting with apparent approval Amanda Craig's screed and others on their child-damaging potential. It seems inconsistent to dub as silly the idea that impressionable children might be moved to kill someone or become gay in imitation of their fave authors or reading, but then take seriously the threat of getting breast implants or taking up pole dancing for the same reason. Still, there's lots to cherish in this book: "There is definitely something to be said for children having their own literature—a separate, secret, subversive world of their own. But there may also be some good in having a common ground of reading between children and adults...books that provide a bridge and understanding. Books we can all share." Right on.

Some further comments:

"...until the late 19th century, children's books rarely depicted children who were not white, male, and privileged." [Not too sure they've come all that far since...particularly as regards the "white" part. I disagree with a later claim that children's literature, like fairy tales, "never [takes] the part of the strong against the weak." By number most children's books still reflect majority, western European, middle class experiences and values. But then, look who writes, illustrates and publishes them.]

"Edward Gorey, another author who initially set out to write for adults, yet whose tales...were ultimately appropriated by children." [Not really: search him as an author in the NYPL catalog and you'll find 15 children's records and 140 adult.]

"...the greatest stories written for children are those produced by people who have felt outside of the mainstream in some manner." [Really? Mark Twain, Randolph Caldecott, Dr. Seuss, E.B. White, Madeleine L'Engle, Ludwig Bemelmans, St. Exupery, Tolkien, Pratchett, Willems...just a few mainstreamers who come to mind.]

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### Christina (A Reader of Fictions) says

For more reviews, Cover Snark and more, visit A Reader of Fictions.

For those who don't know, I have a degree in librarianship. Sadly, I hated my Master's program, but you can call me "master" which is pretty cool. One of the only courses I actually enjoyed during my time in library school was on the history of children's literature. I've been a reader all my life and despite the fact that I didn't read many of the children's classics (or I did and forgot them), the history of children's books is

fascinating to me. As such, I found Bird, Danielson, and Sieruta's *Wild Things!* a delight, full of fun trivia.

Let's be real: I don't read much non-fiction. Why? Because so much of it is dry and dull and there is no plot so I am bored. There's good non-fiction, but I am very story and narrative-voice driven as a reader, so non-fiction can be really tough for me. Thankfully, *Wild Things!* is by a trio of librarians/professional reviewers/bloggers and it's written in a very engaging style. *Wild Things!* not only had interesting content, but was compelling to actually read. The authors are clearly striving for humor in their telling and they achieve that.

Ultimately, I think the authors had two main points. 1) Children's books deserve a lot more respect than they get. 2) Children's book authors are people, and not perfect ones. The overall goal seems mainly to be to dispel the idea that people have about children's books and they're creators. The uninformed think of children's books as "fluffy bunny" books and very simple to throw together, with an extra emphasis on picture books here. The authors thereof are seen as quirky and wholesome, perhaps in a bit of an eternal youth. If there's a connecting thread through the various essays, it's that. Children's books and their authors are more complex than people generally give them credit for.

While everything in here wasn't new to me, thanks to my course in library school, there was a lot of stuff that was. I am a HUGE fan of trivia, so that was delightful. For example, did you know that author Paula Fox is the grandmother of Courtney Love? To make the story sound even more fictional, Fox only learned that when the daughter she'd given up for adoption found her fifty years later. In other news, Shel Silverstein worked for Playboy before he became a children's book author. Those are two of my favorite little nuggets of trivia treasure, but there is much more to be enjoyed.

One section of this book almost made me cry, which, as my friends know, is not an easy feat. There's a lengthy section on LGBT picture books and authors. Basically, I want to punch humanity sometimes. It's great that strides are being made, but my heart breaks for so many of these people. Even more, I'm upset that I didn't know a single one of these authors (Maurice Sendak and Louise Fitzhugh, for example) was GLBTQ+, even though I'm really plugged into the bookish community. It makes it feel like it's being somewhat kept secret even now and that saddens me more. Then there's the section on the reasons books get banned, which includes homosexuality, and Christina had some angry feels. My point is that non-fiction doesn't tend to make me emotional, but this actually did. Nice work, authors!

The only real issue I have with *Wild Things!* is the scope. The subtitle is "Acts of Mischief in Children's Literature," but that is really misleading. There is some of that, certainly, as I've enumerated, but there's so much more. Being gay and writing children's books is not an act of mischief, for example. The subtitle's cute and catchy, but it really doesn't fit with the content. As I said, it's not about mischief, but about the stereotypes of children's literature and how narrow-minded they truly are.

There's a lot of great information in *Wild Things!* and I think other adult readers of children's lit would enjoy reading this book as much as I did.

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### **Darren says**

If you like children's lit, you'll appreciate this. But...I had trouble with the voice and focus. Right from the start, the authors seem to apologize for children's literature and then, through their "shocking" tales, rescue it from a perceived world of "cute." First, I just don't think a non-believer is going to pick up this book, so the

apologizing isn't really necessary, nor is it based in anything accurate. Second, those who do pick up the book (the aforementioned children's lit "believers") are already going to know about 90% of the info and stories that are shared here. Occasionally, the writing is nerdsville, amused with itself. All of that said, I'd still recommend it to anyone who likes kid's books. It's a quick read that at least summarizes things nicely and in a (mostly) entertaining fashion.

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### **Corinne Edwards says**

Wild things is a book for Bibliophiles. It's an ode to children's literature - a romp through the ins and outs and behind-the-scenes adventures of the authors, publishers, editors and yes, readers of literature for the young. In a conversational and familiar tone, this book assumes the reader knows a little about books and wants to know MORE, more about how this book world works and more about how it came to be the way it is.

I found it to be really engaging. I particularly loved the anecdotes and background information about books I'm already familiar with. Did I wish I could UNlearn a few things? Maybe. I'll never think about Shel Silverstein the same way again. But, truth is good and several times I found myself sharing stories I'd read with my reader-sister, I was so intrigued. A good sized portion of this book is dedicated to the sexual orientation of various authors and the emergence of books about homosexuals - since this part didn't interest me as much as the rest, it felt a little long but I know other readers would feel differently, so there you go.

As a girl who grew up reading Where the Sidewalk Ends and Dr. Seuss, Little House on the Prairie and Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret, I was always happy to pick this up and learn more about my favorite thing: books.

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### **Caren says**

If you are at all into children's books, this behind-the-scenes tell-all is sort of like reading a supermarket tabloid about the stars: lots of juicy gossip. Still, some serious issues are addressed (and truthfully, those chapters are not nearly as much fun). The three authors blog about children's books and are apparently friends (although one of the authors has passed away and the book is dedicated to him). This book was just a real lark of a read. I kind of skimmed the preachy bits---I have probably read some of that stuff before---to go straight to the more inconsequential, but more entertaining bits. For example, it was fun to read about how Jon Scieszka was inspired by MAD Magazine. (My brother loved that magazine when we were kids. He was aghast that my mother threw out his collection when he was away at college.) You'll get the real story behind how the Madeleine books came about. You will read about how P.L. Travers changed some chapters in her books to erase some racism, but how she wasn't maybe entirely successful. I learned how the steam shovel came to achieve its final job in "Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel". I could go on, but you get the picture. My advice: if you love children's books, read it.

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### **Julie says**

Ok, so, this book is pretty much my ideal book, as far as nonfiction books go, so my views of it as Completely Awesome are probably pretty subjective. I'm hugely interested in children's literature, the history

of children's literature, and the study of non-mainstream stories for kids, which is all what this book is about. But this book, besides being about all those things, is also delightfully written, engaging, and witty. The authors know what they're talking about, and it's clear that a ton of research went into this book, as well as a well-developed outline of how to tell us their story in the clearest, most fun, wittiest manner. Highly recommended.

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### **Maryanne says**

I'm still not sure how I feel about this book. On the one hand, it contained some dishy, gossipy stories that I never knew and I enjoyed that. It also discussed several issues about children's publishing that I think are important, like the influx of celebrity authors and the impact of the Harry Potter series, and these issues are discussed in an intelligent and balanced manner. On the other hand, I felt throughout my reading experience like I was missing something. Often when that happens, it's a failure of expectation which is entirely my fault, and that's why I haven't given this book a star rating, because I feel it would be unfair to blame the authors for failing to live up to my expectations or to do with their book what I would have done with it. But I think I expected more "wild things," more discussion of the impact of reading on children, especially the psychological impact. For example, there's an entire chapter on the conflict (in the adult world) between "good" fiction for children and "bad" fiction -- the wholesome, quality books that critics and parents love versus the pulpy adventure stories that children devour whole-heartedly (hello, Nancy Drew!). Yet, there was no exploration of WHY this dichotomy might exist, no delving into the psychological needs these books fulfilled for the child. Granted, these authors are not psychologists and clearly this was beyond the scope of the book, but didn't these things occur to them as they did to me? Especially when their title conjured images of Max as King of the Land of Wild Things?

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### **Jean says**

While it may not be the most definitive work on children's literature or on the naughtier bits of author's lives, it still was a fun and informative read. I've already recommended it to a few people but I think anyone interested in children's lit will find something of interest here.

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### **Kaethe says**

The three authors were all US children's book bloggers, so the focus is there. They cover such issues as diversity in authors, book banning, the history of kid's books in the US, adults-reading-children's books, and many other things as well (sex, matricide-with-a-fork, "celebrity" "writers", etc.)

Lots of fun stuff, well-presented, and amusingly. Should appeal to readers of children's books, librarians, teachers, and those of us who just can't ignore a catchy phrase like "matricide-with-a-fork" even if we already follow the blogs. I hope there will be more books to come.

Library copy, natch.

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### **Marjorie Ingall says**

Lots of fun. I've read a couple of scholarly books about subversive and radical kidlit; this, on the other hand, is a casual, chatty, gossipy spin, way less work to read and way more playful. Folks who are familiar with the history of popular children's books won't find a lot of surprises (PL Travers was pretty dang racist! there are many shitty celebrity-penned kidbooks! noted loonybat Courtney Love is author Paula Fox's granddaughter, and Fox doesn't like her much either!) but I enjoyed the book's breadth, tone and lack of pretension. My fave anecdote (and anecdotes are this book's great strength): George Plimpton was such a mensch to newbie Jerry Spinelli! Great story. With bonus Woody Allen guest appearance.

My caveats: It did bug me a bit that there was a chapter on LGBT authors that didn't necessarily support the notion of their books being any more "mischievous" than those of straight authors. What makes their work "acts of mischief"? Merely the writers' sexuality? If the point of the book is that there's a lot of naughtiness in the widely-and-stupidly-regarded-as-insipid-and-cutesy world of children's books, then what makes "AND ALL THESE PEEPS WERE GAY" worthy of its own chapter? I do get what the authors were going for: These writers were outsiders, and it would shock uptight guardians of culture to know they were not straight. But mmm, I had issues.

Also, do not drop coy hints about certain authors' perty, porny adult writing -- C'MON, GIVE US THE GOODS! When you tell us we'd be SHOCKED, SHOCKED and you do not deliver, you sound like the stereotype of shushy librarians and I feel DEPRIVED and AGGRIEVED. (I've read a little of Shel Silverstein's "erotic" stuff, and yeah, EW. But still: THE WORLD NEEDS TO KNOW.)

That said, this is a quick, tasty, informative read for any adult with a fondness for children's books but not a lot of background in their history.

(Full disclosure: I know Betsy Bird a little -- WHO DOESN'T -- and am utterly addicted to her blog for School Library Journal, but have only met her a couple of times in actual real life.)

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### **Virginia Walter says**

Even readers like me who have spent many decades reading, writing, writing about, and teaching about children's books will find interesting new bits of gossip and trivia here. Who knew that Wanda Gag had a scandalous sex life? Or that Tolkien turned down Maurice Sendak as an illustrator for a new edition of THE HOBBIT because an editor mistook Sendak's drawing of wood elves for hobbits, thereby convincing Tolkien that Sendak hadn't read the book closely enough? Some of us can't get enough of this kind of thing.

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### **Joan says**

This was loads of fun to read! The number of famous kids lit authors and illustrators who had unacceptable for then sexual inclinations, (I mean LGBT) boggles the mind. Good thing most weren't publicly known about at the heyday of their career. It likely would have ended a number of careers. Speaking of sex, did you

know that the reason Ungerer vanished from the scene was because he self published a book of erotica? Can't have a kids' writer who admits an interest in sex after all! Actually, that is an attitude that many kids lit professionals have had to deal with: a general reaction that a) they don't do "real" work (Thanks J K Rowling for breaking that perception!) and b) they are rather like big kids themselves. One Newbery award winner says she often feels that if she admits her field of work that she is about to be patted on the head! So of course, you simply can't have these professionals interested in sex, right?! Trina Schart Hyman was not one to cross in the field. She has always been one of my favorite illustrators. At one point she popped a couple well, coupling, into the artwork on the side of a table (look on p133)! She also got even with a particularly vitriolic review about her work from Kirkus via a tombstone in Jean Fritz's "Will you sign here John Hancock?"! That tombstone will be blank in all but the extremely rare first edition, so don't bother racing to your library and looking it up. But if you read p129-130, you can get the full story (there is no copy of the original tombstone, darn it). OK, not the entire book deals with sex by any means but the entire book is a fascinating read. I suppose it'll never get used in an introduction to Children's Literature class because it is too much fun to qualify as a textbook. Too bad! There is story after fascinating story about the well known authors and illustrators of kids' lit in this book. You won't look at many of these books in the same light again! Their focus was to thoroughly remove the notion that kids' lit is full of sweet little bunnies and whatnot and I would say they completely succeeded in their aim! I highly recommend this to Youth Services Librarians and I hope someone does manage to get this book into an introduction to Children's Literature class in Library School. Anyone who thinks they can manage that act of mischief (see subtitle) will make many future library students much happier while studying!

Much thanks to Ms. Hancock of Candlewick for awarding me this marvelous book! Hey, it worked, I now have a copy on order for my system :)

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### **Courtney says**

This has prompt me to look up many books. I already had a banned/challenged bookshelf, but this encouraged me to seek more of those books out. I was already interested in LBGTQ+ picture books (and to a lesser extent YA, I have read *Luna* and heard of many that were mentioned), and this helped list titles I was unfamiliar with. I will also now be seeking out books by celebrities and books that won awards (good as well as *bad* awards).

I loved how the idea of censorship was presented. It's a thorny issue, yet not all bad. I was pleased to see some examples of 'positive' censorship, such as a contemporary author changing her ending a little (by a few words) to avoid exoticizing her non-white main character. Or forwards added to long ago published works explaining why and how the original text was (or in some instances weren't) altered. In other instances it was only images that were changed. Fascinating topics, such as why some works, in some contexts should not be censored, eg works by Twain in an academic setting. I agree that history/literary texts should not be edited to make us look better and that it can (in the right setting) lead to powerful lessons and understanding. Perhaps that is somewhat of an anthropological view, but still valid.

So much good and enjoyment from this. I found it because I had enjoyed another Betsy Bird book, and I will now also consider the other two authors.

Only one minor critique, I wish that the authors had acknowledged their western view point, as it seemed that mostly western texts and ideas were discussed. I am also curious as to other view points. For example in China Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was at one time banned due to talking animals; different cultures

and eras have different mores and ideology.

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### **Lia Marcoux says**

I enjoyed reading this, but overall I would have liked a meatier read on these topics. It felt more like chit-chat, whereas I like my nonfiction to be written in a tone that justifies my feelings of smugness for reading it ("I'm Improving My Mind", I want to be thinking). This was irreverent, which makes sense given the subject matter, but it was sometimes at the expense of actual information.

I really enjoyed the chapter on well-meaning censorship in children's literature. I'd like to learn more about that.

My least favorite sentence in the book: "Illustrators create computer-generated art." Some illustrators, myself included, use a computer to create art. The computer does not generate it.

In the plus column, the hot goss they presented was quite hot!

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### **SmokingMirror says**

Overall quite contradictory, in its condemnation of books that will doubtless be re-evaluated in the near future, and its utilization of a nebulous definition of "PC," deciding for others what is offensive and why. Many aspects of the book will not hold up as well as, say, Caldecott and Co.: Notes on Books and Pictures, or Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie & Folklore in the Literature of Childhood, but I still highly recommend "Wild Things!" for its varied opinions on many books and issues.

"Wild Things!" performed a great service for me by clarifying my thoughts on the fantasy trend in Young Adult literature of books with no real fantastic, wondrous or numinous elements at all; rather, teenage fairies, debutante vampires and boy hunk werewolves behave in typically high school ways, with cliques, exclusive schools, feelings of deserving these privileges for being so special, and much dramatic self-pity for the problems of being a non-human creature, and otherwise appearing to be a run of the mill adolescent. This trend has distressed me by seeming to take away something from my own adolescence, a sort of hidden place for my spirit to soar and to leave behind the popularity contest and at times, snake pit, of teenage life.

A simple phrase dispels a lot of the depression of this trend: they're Deceptions, they're Babysitter's Club Collection (Books 1-4), they're all the Nancy Drew knockoff mystery series that have mostly disappeared over the years. This indicates that the fairy/vampire/magic wizard student fad is going to disappear someday! And I hope that what remains will be well-written variations on the theme and wholly original books for young readers who like to find a great book after a long quest.

Even though I don't rate the book the highest, I'm sure I will go back to it for the irreverent parts, and the gossip, both of which I recommend you at least skim for.

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