

Book Reviews

Mickenberg, Julia L. *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States*. N.Y.; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2006. 389p. alk. paper \$19.95 (paper), \$74 (cloth) (ISBN 0195152816; 0195152808). LC 2004-65457.

the right had clearly won the battle for control of American school textbooks, notwithstanding ongoing accusations of liberal bias...all references to poverty in America were eliminated, and the emphasis was on the United States' global leadership in the "struggle for democracy."

If the above passage conjures images of a study written fifty years from now on the state of education in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century United States, it will stand as yet one more proof of the extent to which "history repeats itself."

In actuality, the quote is from Julia L. Mickenberg's engaging history, *Learning from the Left*, and refers to textbook battles, not of the 1990s "culture wars" or the 2005 "intelligent design" campaigns but, rather, of an earlier time in the 1930s and 1940s that led to the state of textbook affairs in the 1950s as described by Frances Fitzgerald in *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Little Brown, 1979).

Studies of textbooks and ideology are nothing new. What makes Mickenberg's book so welcome is that it investigates, not textbooks, but another group of books produced for children, trade books written by leftist authors who largely escaped the eagle eyes of right-wing censors in mid-twentieth century. Mickenberg describes in fully footnoted detail how children's trade books, widely purchased by parents, teachers, and librarians, during the early Cold War and McCarthy years, "flew under the radar"

of the self-appointed monitors of children's minds.

Although *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War and Radical Politics in the United States* only begins to cover the vast territory delineated by its title, this is an impressive, important, and fascinating book that presents a solid historic groundwork for the examination of the power of literature—of stories—as agents of social change. The shortcomings of *Learning from the Left* are no reflection on Mickenberg's scholarship or talent but, rather, are an indication of the enormity of the task she set herself and of the need for continued investigation of this rich subject.

Mickenberg's book covers roughly the period from the early 1910s through the mid-1960s, and her intent is to reveal the historical development of a cultural forum, an outlet of creative expression and tool for education, within which a variety of leftist authors and illustrators thrived during the dark years of McCarthyism and Cold War. "This hidden history of the children's book field provides insights into how and why the turbulent youth rebellions of the 1960s emerged from the seemingly placid 1950s. By maintaining the democratic spirit of the 1930s through the Cold War, children's literature became a kind of bridge between the Old Left and the New Left generations."

The first part of the book, "Progressive and Proletarian Precedents" provides context, including an overview of the early years of children's book publishing; examination of the demands of librarians, teachers, and parents for books appropriate for children; examples of books written by leftist authors; discussion of the progressive education movement; and description of radical political organizations.

We learn that in 1919 (the year, coincidentally, when both the Communist Party



and the American Legion were founded), Children's Book Week became a national event and publishing houses established their first juvenile divisions. Review journals and book awards were being established as important tools in shaping and informing the book marketplace. *Booklist* was founded in 1905, *Hornbook* in 1925, the Newbery Award in 1922, followed by the Caldecott in 1937, a fertile environment for children's literature. "Both the Right and the Left," writes Mickenberg, "saw children as key to the future, and this interest in children was manifested in children's programming as well as in literature for children. For instance, the [Ku Klux Klan] and the [Communist Party] had junior programs, and Communists, Legionnaires, and Christians all created special publications for children."

Mickenberg describes how concern over children's reading and education led to tensions between advocates of authoritarian approaches and those supporting inquiry and critical thinking. By way of illustration, Mickenberg examines books published at the time such as Carl Sandburg's *Rootabaga Stories* (1922), Alfred Kreyborg's *Funnybone Alley* (1927), and Wanda Gág's *Millions of Cats* (1928), and, in the realm of nonfiction, the works of Lucy Sprague Mitchell, founder of the Bank Street College of Education and the Writers' Laboratory, from which emerged writers such as Margaret Brown Wise (*Goodnight Moon*, 1947) and Ruth Krauss (*The Carrot Seed*, 1945), among others. All these authors supported leftist politics and wrote respectfully for young audiences. Mitchell, and many of the authors published under Bank Streets' Golden Book imprint, sought to demystify the world for children, describing industrial processes, urban activities, rural life, and sensitive social issues. Illustrations of noncaricatured African Americans first appeared in these books.

The second part of *Learning from the Left*, "Producing Dissent," examines the way in which social problems, especially racism and poverty, entered into children's

literature in the 1930s via stories featuring child protagonists who explored their worlds, asked questions, didn't accept authority, and wondered at the injustices they encountered. Mickenberg carefully documents the unfolding of the treatment of race in children's books especially well, revealing the connections between left-wing politics, particularly the Communist Party and the nascent civil rights movement. She describes in detail how leftist authors, illustrators, and editors grappled with producing books that treated racism honestly and openly for children, and she discusses the development of books that featured stories of the positive contributions made by minorities, especially African Americans, to U.S. society.

In one fascinating passage, Mickenberg tells the story of a 1943 pamphlet, *The Races of Mankind*, authored by anthropologists Gene Weltfish and Ruth Benedict (both leftists and women), which "blamed uneven wealth and achievement among various racial and ethnic groups on environment and inequality of opportunity rather than on inherent racial difference." The pamphlet, commissioned by the U.S.O., was used by the Army during World War Two in training soldiers who had to fight alongside men of many races and ethnicities, and was also a hit in New York City high schools, which purchased them by the thousands. "William Taft High School in the Bronx purchased 4,000 copies of the pamphlet, and its English department used it as the basis of a unit on 'working toward brotherhood.'" A student campaign ensued to desegregate blood banks. The pamphlet was later banned by the Army after members of Congress complained that it caused "racial antagonism." A similar tale from the civil rights movement, describes a student crediting Langston Hughes's *First Book of Negroes* (1952) with inspiring him to participate in lunch counter sit-ins.

Learning from the Left is as rich in detail, variety, complexity, and fun as children's literature itself. Here, we read about Harry Granick's *Run, Run! An Adventure in New*

York (1941), we see reproductions of illustrations such as William Steig's (of *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* fame) cartoon protesting the firing of New York City teachers following the infamous Rapp–Courdert hearings, and learn all about Langston Hughes's relations with his publisher, Franklin Watts, in the 1950s.

The last third of Mickenberg's book, "Science and History for Girls and Boys," describes exactly how it was that left-wing authors continued to be gainfully employed during the McCarthy era. *Learning from the Left* has all the hallmarks of being a seminal contribution to a little explored aspect of children's literature and progressive social change, it should be read by everyone with an interest in that genre and is a "must purchase" for all library collections serving schools of library and information science, departments of education, and the general public. — *Elaine Harger, Mount Si High School, Snoqualmie, Washington*

***Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 7th ed.**

Comp. the Office for Intellectual Freedom. Chicago: ALA, 2006. 521p. alk. paper, \$52 (\$46.80 ALA members) (ISBN 0838935613). LC 2005-22409.

As with earlier incarnations, this edition consists largely of "guidelines, policies, and interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights, along with the ALA Code of Ethics and Freedom to Read Statement." Additionally, it contains essays on "timely issues" such as minors' First Amendment rights, Internet access, and Public Forum Doctrine, as well as a guide to OIF's Web site and a short glossary. Contributors include Candace D. Morgan, Judith F. Krug, Beverley Becker, Evelyn Shaevel, Theresa Chmara, Daniel Mach, Larra Clark, Linda K. Wallace, and Don Wood.

Unquestionably, a necessary item for all libraries, the *Manual* nevertheless displays a number of serious flaws and omissions. It continues to itself exclude dissident or inconvenient opinions and events. For instance, the widely condemned, OIF-sponsored film, *The Speaker*, is not

discussed in historical overviews. (Zoia Horn and Eric Moon do recount that misadventure in their memoirs, and detailed information also appears in the 1992 E.J. Josey festschrift.) And serious critics of the much-vaunted, but essentially fraudulent, Banned Books Week go unmentioned. Because, even after previous prodding, OIF refuses to cite divergent views on BBW, here are a few: Charles Willett, "The Almost Banned Book Awards" (*Counterpoise*, Jan. 1999); Earl Lee, "Really Banned Books" (*Counterpoise*, April 1998); Earl Lee, "Almost Banned Books, 1998 and 1999" (*Counterpoise*, April 2000); Dan Cherubin, "Banned Books Week: Creating the Acceptable Taboo" (*Counterpoise*, Oct. 2003); Earl Lee, "Almost Banned Books 2002" (*Counterpoise*, Oct. 2003); Earl Lee, "Almost Banned Books: A Brief History" (*Counterpoise*, April 2001); and Fred Woodworth, "Crap-Detection Department" (*The Match*, winter 2001/2002; reprinted in *Unabashed Librarian*, no. 124).

Laudably new are three discrete references to ALA's Poor People's Policy, adopted in 1990 and substantially ignored since then. However, there is no mention whatever of the recent cascade of barriers to poor people's use of library resources, reported from Denver, Philadelphia, and Houston to San Luis Obispo, California, and Elgin, Illinois. Typically, libraries in low-income areas are open fewer hours than those in more affluent neighborhoods and are more likely to be closed completely or reduced to clerk-only service during budget crunches. Some institutions have deliberately proscribed "offensive body odor" (aka homeless people) and sleeping on the premises. Others have devised elaborate behavior codes and have limited time spent, for instance, in the concession room. This alarming trend, clearly counter to the intent of ALA's Poor People's policy, goes unremarked, even though SRRT's Poverty Task Force issued an urgent alert on the topic (partially reprinted in *Public Libraries*, May/June 2005), and I addressed the problem at ALA's 2005 Annual Conference ("Classism in the Stacks: Libraries