

"Coping With Growing Up": The Oral Tradition in Children's Literature

Susan Dean

Volume 9, Number 1-2, 1987

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081433ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081433ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Dean, S. (1987). "Coping With Growing Up": The Oral Tradition in Children's Literature. *Ethnologies*, 9(1-2), 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081433ar>

“Coping With Growing Up”: The Oral Tradition in Children’s Literature

Susan DEAN

“Folklore plays a vital but unappreciated role in holding together the frayed, factory made fabric of our lives. Whether it be useful or silly, true or false, folklore connects us to the past and to each other because it requires face-to-face contact. It exists when people share an identity, when they recognize themselves as members of a group united by race, nationality, occupation, class, geography, or age; and since all of us once belonged to that group of human beings we call children, the folklore of childhood brings together all of us.”¹

Children, like adults, are guided by their folk traditions. Folklore provides children with the guidelines to learn what is acceptable behaviour in our society and ways in which to adapt to peer pressure. According to the authors of *One Potato, Two Potato, The Folklore of American Children*, the “folklore of children” is the “time worn rituals of sharing secrets or foreseeing the future and time-tested ways of defending their self esteem or dealing with social problems like farting or having a girlfriend”.² These traditions are transmitted from one generation to the next and passed from one child to another. “Sometimes parents, grandparents, teenagers, brothers, sisters and even books, help tie together the forever unravelling strands of children’s lore.”³

It is important to differentiate between what is termed the “folklore of children” and the “folklore of childhood”. The “folklore of childhood” is what’s considered appropriate for children by adults.

-
1. Mary and Herbert Knapp, *One Potato, Two Potato. The Folklore of American Children*. (New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1976), p. 3.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

It is practiced and transmitted by those of authority in schools, camps and organizational groups such as Girl Guides or Boy Scouts. It includes songs, stories, jokes, rhymes and games.

The "folklore of children" is what children use themselves in order to respond to the pressures of growing up and acquiring power and prestige within the group. This type of folklore is performed behind the backs of adults. When children play together unsupervised they learn how to govern themselves assisted by their own set of rules, grounded in folk traditions. Their rules enable them to deal with cheaters or crybabies, for example, and allow them to distinguish between the self-interest of the individual and the group.

The study attempts to collect and unravel the mysteries of the "folklore of children" pertaining to the anxieties and stresses of growing up. As a child approaches adulthood there are certain basic needs common to everyone, concerning how they achieve personal happiness and the requirements for social approval. A child's needs are first intensely and narrowly personal but as the child begins to mature, his or her needs broaden and become more widely socialized. Thus the need to deal with social problems and fit in with the group becomes a focus. Through this process these needs do not evolve without pressures or anxieties. This is the period of growing up when children become not only aware of their own sexuality but also the differences between boys and girls. It is this age, which librarians call the Junior Reader, grades 3-6, that this study dwells on. It is not only interested in what is used by children but also the role of children's literature in transmitting the folklore of children. It is present, so how is it presented?

The study looks at literature from two countries and two time periods, the turn of the century and the present. It will attempt a comparison between American authors Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, and Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and Canadian authors Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and Jean Little's *Stand in The Wind*. All of these books are available and read widely by children within the Vaughan library system.⁴ The readers of these books are most likely to be pre-adolescent girls. As a result the study will tend to reflect a girl's perception of growing up as opposed to a boy's.

4. One of the books that would appear to be the most obvious Canadian book on growing up is W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen The Wind*. However, it is not found in the Junior Reader section but rather the Adult section. As a result, since it wasn't picked up by children of their own accord it couldn't be a part of this study.

Little Women was written in 1868 and thus reflects the social attitudes of that time towards girls and women. It's the story of four sisters, their family, and dilemmas they encounter concerning a reduced standard of living, what is acceptable behaviour for young women, courting procedures, marriage and the death of a family member. Read by many young girls for the past 100 years, it has played a vital role in the transmission of folk ideas since the 1860s.

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret was written almost twenty years ago but is still vital in its approach to posing questions concerning God, boys and growing up, as seen through the eyes of a twelve year old girl, Margaret Simon. With sensitivity and humour the author has captured the joys, fears and uncertainty of a young girl approaching adolescence.

Anne of Green Gables has been read and enjoyed by children and adults around the world. It's the story of an eleven year old girl, Anne Shirley, who after years in an orphan asylum is anticipating a home of her own. The book is the story of how this imaginative girl grows from an awkward, homely child to an accomplished young woman.

Stand in The Wind is set at a beach cottage in the summer. It is the story of two sets of sisters who have never met but are destined, much to their initial dislike, to spend a week together. Martha, Ellen, Rosemary and Christine learn a lot about each other and new things about themselves, despite the fact they thought they'd never get along.

Since folklore is by definition an oral tradition, the role books play in its transmission is liable to present difficulties. For the folklorist, the study proposes that books also have the possibility of keeping folklore alive. Perhaps this is more often seen in children's books pertaining to traditional games, rhymes, songs and riddles so readily available in the marketplace. It's easy to see how a riddle or a joke could be recited by one child and then passed on to playmates. But what of books pertaining to stories dealing with everyday life? The study attempts to explore how they, too, transmit folklore.

The reason the study chose to focus on literature is that there is an increasing emphasis on how books can help the individual. It is assumed that books written by sensitive, thoughtful adults who are not only observers of children but can also remember their own childhood vividly, can create literature that will help children better un-

derstand themselves.⁵ As a result, there is today an amazing variety of material involving social problems, urban and academic situations and psychological dilemmas with even greater stress than before on the realism of the presentation.⁶ The authors of *Children and Books* have summarized this wave of enthusiasm for books helping children to adjust to social problems:

Books are no substitute for living, but they can add immeasurably to its richness. When life is absorbing books can enhance our sense of its significance. When life is difficult, they can give a momentary relief from trouble, afford a new insight into our problems or those of others, or provide the rest and refreshment we need. Books have always been a source of information, comfort and pleasure for people who know how to use them. This is as true for children as for adults.⁷

The study breaks the collecting into three categories, "Identification and Power", "Battle of the Sexes",⁸ and "Coping with the Present and Coping with the Unknown".⁹ For pre-adolescents use these forms of lore to cope with the stresses pertaining to growing up and understanding who they are as individuals, as well as learning what it means to be a member of human society.

Under the classification "Identification and Power", the study is broken into three subcategories—naming, name jeers and sexual jeers. Everyone has their own name and perhaps a nickname that they identify with. Names and nicknames have different meanings and the way that they are used are both connotative and denotative. In our society it is a practice to name children with names that have a positive connotation, perhaps in relationship to another respected family member. In the process of naming, parents avoid giving their children names considered inappropriate for the child's sex. As well children are given names or nicknames because of their appearance, behaviour or background.¹⁰ An important aspect of naming is who named you and who is allowed to call you by that name? Whichever name is chosen a child identifies with it and thus it provides a sense of control. The name is the essence of the being and creates a form

-
5. Virginia Haviland, *Children and Literature. Views and Reviews*. (Illinois, Scott, Foresman and Co., 1977), p. 7.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
 7. Zena Sutherland and Mary Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books*. (Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1977), p. 5.
 8. Mary and Herbert Knapp, p. 82.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
 10. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore*. (New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1978), p. 45.

of magic, where a *Princess* will act like a princess and a *Spaz* will act like a spaz. For the child struggling with growing up, their name or nickname functions not only as a form of identification but also perhaps as an identification they'd rather not have. Thus choosing names that they associate with beauty or power is a very important part of the oral tradition.

Jeers, even though they often appear loud and vulgar and sound like the prelude to a fight, have a very distinct function for the pre-adolescent child. Firstly, jeering contests often take the place of physical combat and in many ways provide an identification with friendship. What is insulting coming from anyone else is a form of sport coming from a friend or someone you'd like to be a friend. This is common between girls and boys when they begin to recognize one another and identify with the opposite sex in a new way. Children will often ask simple questions like "Where do babies come from?" but they aren't mature enough to ask "What can I do to make the boy who sits in front of me like me?" Oral tradition in the form of taunts or jeers provides these answers.¹¹

In our society jeering has a very distinct social function to help keep children in line. It is the way that not only adults can request acceptable behaviour but also more importantly how the group or other children approach acceptable behaviour. Sometimes this behaviour is quite contrary to what adults expect.

Formulaic responses to jeers are very much a part of the jeering process. A child who jeers at another child is emulating a sense of possession of power. A child who provides a comeback is emulating a dual sense of power. There is no doubt that jeers can be harmful to a child, specifically those related to naming in regards to looks or behaviour, such as *Fatso*, *Foureyes* or *Spaz*. However, the comebacks help that child adjust to dealing with the group and request a form of acceptance.

The second category, the "Battle of the Sexes", deals with sexlore consisting of rhymes, prophecies and superstitions regarding sexuality. When children in the 4th and 5th grades realize that there is now a greater difference between boys and girls, they rely on the folklore traditions of sexlore to deal with the embarrassment of changing voices and whiskers, growing breasts and new bras. Their shyness about such things is transformed into a game. An example of the types of traditions performed is the rhyme that 5th and 6th grade girls re-

11. Mary and Herbert Knapp, p. 91.

cite when they become increasingly aware of the fact that they are still flat-chested, while other girls might be acquiring their first bras:

We must, we must
 Increase or bust.
 The bigger the better
 The tighter the sweater
 The boys like you better.
 An so we must.¹²

This kind of rhyming is a way for a girl to get used to the changes in her body proclaiming her new found sexuality to others around her.

With the use of sexual superstitions the importance of the group is emphasized. Everyone, adults and children alike, listens intently to those around them for advice. For a child, advice from a peer group is accepted more readily than professional advice or advice from an adult. Sometimes advice on contraception and seduction is passed on by an older brother or sister. This type of folklore is often transmitted through folk belief and it functions to formulate concepts concerning morality.

In the third classification, "Coping with the Present and Coping with the Unknown," folklore functions to provide accommodation with one's own identity, sexuality and bodily functions.¹³ It also includes superstitions which provide the formula for what is acceptable behaviour not only for today but also provides experience to deal with the uncertainty of the future. The superstitions taken most seriously by children are their personal inventions: "If I do this then this will happen and I will be accepted".¹⁴ These personal superstitions provide a form of security for the child. Within the broader context many of these superstitions, though personal, are based on already achieved ideas of what is acceptable behaviour. This form of folklore helps children to cope with the here and now and the fearful unknown by allowing them to escape into fantasy as well as to console them by reminding them that their troubles aren't unique.¹⁵

12. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

Identification and Power

In all the books surveyed names were important to the characters, not just their given names but also what they chose for their own identification. In *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne is insistent that her name is spelled properly, Anne spelled with an 'e'. As a girl without the security of a family or home, her name provides a very important aspect of her identification. However, when Anne discovers that Marilla and Matthew did not intend keeping her and Marilla asks for her name, she responds:

"Will you please call me Cordelia?" she said eagerly.

"Call you Cordelia! Is that your name?"

"No-o-o. It's not exactly my name but I would love to be called Cordelia. It's such a pretty elegant name."¹⁶

Here, even though the name Anne provides a form of identity, Cordelia functions as a name that involves romance and in a sense distances Anne from a particularly difficult time.

In *Stand in The Wind*, Martha and Ellen wince at the thought of two girls coming for a visit to their cottage with names like Christine and Rosemary. As they discuss their fate Ellen says gloomily:

"Rosemary and Christine. Even their names are awful."

"Maybe they'll have nicknames."

"Yeah. Rosie and Chrissy. How sweet!" Ellen jeered.¹⁷

In this example the names Rosemary and Christine denote a bad feeling for Martha and Ellen and create an instant dislike.

Christine's nickname later becomes known to Martha as Kit. It's what her father calls her. This name provides more of an identification with power than Christine for her mother always calls her "Christine baby" or "you poor, poor baby". As a result of how her mother treats her, she has a shy, quiet and 'scaredy cat' temperament. When Martha insists that everyone call her Kit she opens up and takes on new strength and character.

In *Little Women*, a sign of growing up is the correct use of one's name. Josephine prefers to be called Jo but her sister Meg insists that she not be called by that "boyish name". When called Jo, Josephine

16. L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*. (New York, Grossett and Dunlop, 1908), p. 36.

17. Jean Little, *Stand in The Wind*. (New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1975), p. 7.

fits her tomboyish description. While running with her friend Laurie, her sister Meg says reprovingly:

"You've been running Josephine. How could you? When will you stop such romping ways?"

"Never till I'm old and stiff, and have to use a crutch. Don't try to make me grow up before my time, Meg."¹⁸

Here Jo associates with her name and the magic that it has. She isn't quite prepared to grow up and act like a lady.

One hundred years later in *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, naming is still important, though not necessarily to guard oneself from growing up, for that is the desire. The characters do, however, like Anne Shirley, pick names that they think are more beautiful than their own and use them in their secret club.

All of these books emphasize the importance of naming not only as identification but also as protection from growing up too quickly, as well as a way of removing a girl from uncertainty concerning her body and how she looks. Thus a beautiful name is chosen to allow the girl to identify herself with what she feels she doesn't have.

Jeers are also present in the four books under discussion. There is jeering between sisters and brothers and jeering between friends. The most common form of jeering is the type used to present what is acceptable behaviour. In *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, Margaret chooses to wear loafers without socks, much to her mother's chagrin, on her first day at her new school. The reason for this behaviour, despite the warning of blisters, is that her new friend Nancy has told her that "all the girls didn't wear socks and if she did she'd look like a baby and the other kids wouldn't want her to join the secret club."¹⁹

Of all the books, Judy Blume's book contains the largest number of common jeers and sexual jeers. "He's disgusting, shut up animal, he's the biggest drip and cut it out lobster. . .take your lobster claws off me" are just some examples of the jeering between boys and girls.²⁰

18. Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*. (Wisconsin, Whitman Publishing Co., 1869), p. 109.

19. Judy Blume, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. (New York, Dell Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 24, 25.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 12, 67, 68.

Sexual jeers are also present, usually coming from the boys. When Philip Leroy, the boy Margaret likes, gives her his birthday greetings, he said:

“Happy birthday to you
You live in a zoo
You look like a monkey
And you smell like one too!

That’s a pinch to grow an inch. And you know where you need an inch!”²¹

Philip Leroy is insinuating that Margaret needs to grow an extra inch on her already growing breasts.

In comparison, *Little Women* has little jeering in it and particularly not sexual jeering. This is due to the period in which it was written. Jeering was not encouraged and sexual jeering was considered rude and certainly not the way boys and girls should treat one another. Jeers more often came in the form of threats: “Play fair Teddy, or I’ll never believe you again.”²² The reason for Judy Blume’s book being more provocative in terms of jeering is that it fits in with the thesis that today’s books should be more realistic and deal with the problems facing the pre-adolescent, while *Little Women*, in comparison, is more inclined to promote unity of the family and thus the folk ideas of home, motherhood, and peace and happiness without dissension.

In the Canadian book, *Stand in The Wind*, there is little reference to sexual jeering. This lack is likely due to the fact that there are no boys present. The only type of jeering that takes place is between the sisters when they are dissatisfied with one another’s behaviour; for example, the time Ellen cooks dinner and Martha finds her favourite dinner ruined. She retorts “This supper is only fit for pigs.”²³

In *Anne of Green Gables* Anne, with her vivid imagination, not only jeers at the elders she disapproves of but jeers at the boys and the boys at her. Gilbert Blythe, liked by all the girls, makes fun of them by jeering. He calls Anne “Carrots!” and Diana “Crow”.²⁴ In a sense what he is doing is dealing with the fact that he likes a girl without saying ‘I like you’.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

22. Alcott, p. 107.

23. Little, p. 143.

24. Montgomery, p. 127.

The Battle of the Sexes

In all the books the girls are concerned with their appearance, how they look and how they are perceived by the opposite sex. However, sexlore rhymes, prophecy and superstitions are not as evident.

In *Little Women*, what is more evident is the folk idea of what a girl should be and how to distinguish when a girl is in love. When the girls suspect that Meg is in love, they find that "Meg doesn't blush or faint or refuse to eat like girls in love are supposed to do".²⁵

The same is true in *Anne of Green Gables*. The girls are encompassed with what Marilla would call their own vanity. In terms of how to relate to boys, proposals and marriage, they look to their older sisters and friends for advice. Anne asks her friend Ruby Gillis, who had so many older sisters, how men propose:

"Ruby told me she was hid in the hall pantry when Malcolm Andrews proposed to her sister Susan. She said Malcolm told Susan that his dad gave him the farm in his own name and then he said 'What do you say, darling pet, if we get hitched this fall?' And Susan said, 'Yes—no—I don't know—let me see—' and then they were engaged, as quick as that."²⁶

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret is by far the most provocative concerning sexual prophecies, superstitions and rhymes. Margaret and her friends have a secret club which they call "The Four Pre-Teen Sensations". Part of the initiation is to buy a bra and exercise everyday to the rhyme, "I must, I must increase my bust".²⁷

There were also superstitions and prophecies regarding their appearance, such as if you brush your hair well it will grow up to an inch a month; by the age of 12 you start to smell so you have to wear deodorant; and when you get your period you have to wash your face with soap everyday or you'll get pimples.

Coping with the Present and Coping with the Unknown

In *Coping with the Present*, accommodating yourself often comes in the form of 'fartlore' and kissing games.²⁸ As children begin to experiment with erotic kissing games they rely on folklore to provide them with the boundaries of what is acceptable behaviour.

25. Alcott, p. 158.

26. Montgomery, p. 214.

27. Blume, p. 48.

28. Mary and Herbert Knapp, pp. 211, 216.

The only book containing kissing games is *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. Fartlore was non-existent.

However, all three books are rich in the games and dares played between boys and girls. The games played in *Little Women*, for example, are not sexually oriented, rather they are role oriented. One game played is Camp where the boys act as Commanders-in-Chief and Staff Officers and the girls as Company.

One of the best examples of Coping with the Unknown is found in *Stand in the Wind*. Christine, who is afraid of almost everything, chants a rhyme while standing in the wind during a major storm. As she recites "I stand in the wind and eat peanut brittle" over and over again, she gains courage to face the unknown temper of the storm. Also in the story, Martha has a good luck stone that she rubs to make her wish about summer camp come true.

In *Little Women* the girls also have ways of coping with the unknown. When their mother has to leave for Washington to nurse their ailing father, their anxieties are quieted by the idea that they must "go on with their work as usual, for work is a blessed solace" and if they "hoped and kept busy" then their wish concerning a speedy recovery for their father would come true.²⁹

This paper only skims the surface concerning the amount of folklore available in both Canadian and American literature. The analysis is a sample only, not a complete comparison between the two countries. All four books, despite their time of publication, are full of folk ideas, games and proverbs concerning what is acceptable behaviour for children.

The presence of folklore in children's literature cannot be underestimated. As suggested by the initial quote in this essay, folklore is what "brings together all us. It exists when people share an identity. . . ." ³⁰ No society is complete without folklore. It is the folk concepts we learn from childhood that make us a part of various groups within society. Thus society's fictional literature must reflect some of those segments from our oral traditions.

"The folklore of children", as opposed to the "folklore of childhood", is more difficult to find in children's literature only because it is what children practice "out of earshot" of adults. Thus authors being adults can only incorporate into their stories what they remem-

29. Alcott, p. 123.

30. Mary and Herbert Knapp, p. 3.

ber as children or what children are willing to tell them. This is evident from the lack of sexlore and accommodation rhymes and games. Therefore, the seemingly shocking emphasis on sexuality found by folklore collectors Mary and Herbert Knapp in *One Potato, Two Potatoes* isn't as evident in children's literature.

However, with the emphasis of today's children's authors on presenting a more realistic approach, the "folklore of children" may creep in more and more. But the books are written by adults so most of the "folklore of children" will still remain strictly an oral tradition in the schoolyard or wherever children gather. In fact, it functions best in that surrounding where oral traditions are used time and time again amongst friends.

As Anne of Green Gables would say, "How can anything be perfect in an unperfect world?"³¹ The "folklore of children" has a place all of its own—in the secrets that pre-adolescents share with one another. Secrets that we can never know unless we could become children ourselves again. Yet, as adults, we've already shared some of those secrets and it has helped to form our concepts of reality and society today. True, literature does transmit some of that, but once something is verbal, few other media surpass the oral traditions of children's folklore for tenacity.

York University
North York, Ontario

31. Montgomery, p. 253.