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## Reflecting A New Confidence: Irish Historical Fiction for Children

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### Reflecting A New Confidence: Irish Historical Fiction for Children

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The first striking feature of Irish historical fiction for children is its sheer volume. In my reckoning, approximately one quarter of all Irish books for children consists of those of predominantly historical interest. We can only speculate as to why this should be the case. Fiction for children is not, however, isolated from other forms of cultural activity and there is in the wider culture of Ireland a very high interest in history. Arguments about history can be heard, for example, on popular chat shows on radio and television. The names of certain historians are as well known as those of contemporary poets, dramatists, and novelists. Much contemporary literature for adults reflects this strong historical interest. It is, perhaps, natural that publishers should wish to take advantage of this interest by publishing books of historical interest for children.

The historical novel has a particular importance in colonial and post-colonial cultures, when people need to explain who they are or why their plight is painful. But the present enormous growth in historical fiction for children in Ireland would seem to me to reflect a new confidence in Irish society, emanating from the widespread popular belief that if we understand the past we might behave better in the future.

The question as to why an individual writer might choose to write historical fiction for children has been answered in a great variety of ways by different writers. History can offer ready-made stories and, to some extent, characters. History can offer a wealth of material detail. History can enable writers to deal with delicate or controversial subjects in a safer context than the utterly contemporary would. Some writers feel the need to tell stories that they feel have been forgotten or ignored; their passion and excitement in discovering, for example, that the history of women's lives is being told for the first time is something they want to share with children. **[End Page 369]**

If history is to work as fiction in writing for children it seems to me that there are some basic rules to be borne in mind. The first of these is that the writer must work very hard to learn about the past and to get the details right. In the words of Katherine Paterson:

The world of the book must be as accurate as the writer can make it, not only because the writer owes this much to history, but also because she owes this much to fiction.

(227)

Paterson would also emphasize that being true to the past means being true to a time when moral and social sensibilities were different from today's and that to sanitize the past is to do an injustice to it and to condescend to the present. It can be a challenge to deal with religion, class, gender, or race, in a historical context, in a way that does not avoid the less pleasant aspects of the past. In Paterson's words, poor historical fiction will

simply dress up modern characters in pseudo-ancient dress and so make the characters tamer and more like ourselves than historical people.

(227)

The second rule would seem to me to be that, having done a lot of research, the writer must be prepared to abandon most of it, to pare the details down to the necessary minimum for the success of the plot. The third rule, I think, is that the writer must feel passionately that there is something about the past that he or she wants to share with children.

There has been evidence of a definite struggle on the part of writers to find forms that will enable them to tell the stories of Ireland's past effectively to children. Previously, Irish writers of historical fiction for adults confronted these problems (and solved them) by choosing a hero who experiences the burdens of history but not as one of its main actors, not as one of its great figures. This figure becomes an observer and someone with whom the reader can identify. Frequently, he (in the earlier periods of Irish historical fiction the hero was generally a...



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