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Children's Classics in the Electronic Medium

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

Children's Classics in the Electronic Medium

Sally Maynard (bio), Cliff McKnight (bio), and Melanie Keady (bio)

“and what is the use of a book,” thought Alice, without pictures or conversations?”

The rapid evolution of modern technologies, such as film, television, and video, has led to concerns about their effect on children. As a result of these new technologies, a generation has emerged that is accustomed to experiencing other media in addition to print as part of everyday life. Often termed “the television generation,” these young people have been exposed to a large number of images. The result of this exposure is the development of sophisticated levels of “visual literacy,” or “the ability to find meaning in imagery” (Yenawine 845). The concerns expressed about this “television generation” are that the concentration on images and the increase in visual literacy have affected our children’s attention span and their desire to read. An example can be seen in P. D. James’s discussion of recent attempts to condense English literature into extracts that “might hold the interest of 13-year-olds with an attention-span dictated by television” (14).

There is no doubt that television viewing is a significant part of children’s lives, as demonstrated by figures for the UK which state that, in 1993, “half of 7 to 10 year olds had a TV in their room—for the 11 to 14 age group this rose to nearly seven in ten” (Fry 53). The television generation might also be called the “computer generation,” (Papert x), as children use computers for many purposes, mostly for playing games, but also “to write, to draw, to communicate, to obtain information . . . to establish social ties . . . to isolate themselves (Papert ix). In fact, children **[End Page 184]** are becoming so familiar with computers that it is often observed that many of them are more conversant with computers than are their parents (see Meek 222, Bromley 84).

As a result of the decreasing interest in reading and the increasing appeal of computers, it has been suggested that the electronic environment is becoming more important to the growing number of children who do not respond well to traditional print media and who are reluctant to read. Indeed, increasing emphasis is now being placed on the electronic environment in teaching methods, particularly with regard to reading (Chu 353).

A relatively new medium, the electronic book, is of relevance here. The electronic book represents the combination of the advantages of the printed book, particularly its universal interface, with the capabilities of the computer. As a result, the electronic book is likely to be similar to a printed one in that it will have pages incorporating text and pictures, but it offers an extra dimension in that it has the potential to include additional media on its pages. Therefore, the electronic book adds more to the text and pictures in terms of animation, sounds, and a narrator (Kafai and Soloway 19), which may render the electronic book attractive to children, especially those for whom visual literacy has become significant. Electronic books might, therefore, have the power to bridge the gap between print and other media, and thereby encourage reading in those children who are reluctant.

The following discussion is concerned with the use of classics in the electronic medium. The classics for children and the issues relevant to electronic books will be considered, followed by the results of a study (Keady) that investigated various user aspects of a classic in the electronic medium—in this case, a version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. We turn first to a consideration of classics for children.

What is a Classic?

The term *classic* is often used loosely and is a term that can be applied equally to children's and adult's literature. Some *classics* are also written for adults but become generally accepted as stories for children; for example, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) (Darton 106–7; Thwaite 40; Kinnell 43–44). However, for present purposes, we will concentrate on the classics of literature that were intended by their authors to be read specifically for children.

It is also difficult to define precisely what is...



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Huckleberry in INDIA, the whole image is fluid.

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