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## Review of *Children's Literature of the English Renaissance* by Warren W. Wooden

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## Book Reviews

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*Children's Literature of the English Renaissance.* By Warren W. Wooden. Edited, with an introduction, by Jeanie Watson. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986. xxii + 181 pp. \$19.00

During his all too brief career before his death in 1983, Warren Wooden published a wide variety of important pieces on many aspects of reading literature to explore the social and cultural contexts of the English Renaissance. One of his major interests was children's literature. Jeanie Watson has brought together nine of his essays on this subject in a beautifully edited and produced volume. Two of these essays had never been published; some others had appeared in journals and conference proceedings not readily available. Not only does this collection make these essays more accessible, but by reading them together and seeing the connections between them, we can perceive much more clearly the dimensions and the significance of the field of children's literature. *Children's Literature of the English Renaissance* aids us in learning more about the nature of childhood in late medieval/early modern England.

Wooden's essays not only provide material on a seldom explored theme, but also use children's literature to add to our knowledge of English Renaissance culture. Using a broad definition of children's literature—that children's literature includes any work in which a child takes pleasure—Wooden's scholarship helps us understand more about the cultural, pedagogical, political, and theological realities of Renaissance society. Also, using such a definition allows Wooden to analyze which books would appeal to children and why. Wooden explores whether or not authors deliberately considered children as part of their audiences and how that might have affected the way they presented their material.

The chronological range of these essays is from the late Middle Ages to the end of the seventeenth century, and they deal with both specific works as well as more general discussions of cultural attitudes. The essays in this collection include ones on such specific authors as John Skelton, John Foxe, Michael Drayton, John Taylor, and John Bunyan as well as on such topics as the origins of children's literature, childermass sermons, and depictions of fairies in the English Renaissance.

One of the strongest essays in the collection is "Childermass Sermons in Late Medieval England." Wooden's essays on the ceremonies of the boy bishops, which came to end with the advent of Protestantism, is a fine complement to Natalie Davis's classic essay, "The Reasons of Misrule." Boy bishops were elected on St. Nicholas Day (December 6) and presided over a number of very popular festivals until Candlemas (February 2); the boy bishops (and occasionally girls) actually preached at the feast of Holy Innocents' Day, December 28. Wooden

looks at three such sermons, finding them far more than mockeries of adult sermons; instead they dealt with serious topics.

His essay, "The Topos of Childhood in Marian England," contains fascinating material on different interpretations of childhood by Protestants and Catholic theorists. Also of especial interest was the essay on English Renaissance fairy poetry. Wooden's discussion of children's interest in fairies bridges literature and cultural history in expanding knowledge of popular beliefs in folklore and superstition. Wooden's essays also add to our knowledge of the writing strategies of such major figures as John Foxe and John Bunyan by examining how they aimed some of their material at children. Wooden is particularly subtle in his close reading of some incidents in Foxe's *The Book of Martyrs*. He demonstrates how effectively Foxe used children in his narrative and how he expressed their fears and desires. The copious illustrations in the book, he shows, would have made it especially appealing to children.

*Children's Literature of the English Renaissance* is a beautifully written and edited collection. The comprehensive notes that accompany each essay are very helpful for those wishing to pursue the subject further. This book will be of value not only to those who specialize in children's literature, but to anyone interested in the literature and culture of late medieval/early modern England.

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