

Children's Literature in Turkey

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Rich folk sources maintained an oral tradition of Turkish children's literature for many centuries. There were Karagöz shadow-plays, the amusing and witty stories of Nasreddin Hodga, the fairy tales and the Keloglan (Egghead) tales, to name just a few. In the written form, children's literature dates from the 1850s, when attempts were made to reorganize and renew the Ottoman Empire. The first published children's book, *Nuhbet'ül Etfal* (To the most beautiful child - 1859, by Kayserili Dr. Rüştü), was an alphabet with a few translated fables and short stories at the end. The first periodical *Mümeyyiz* (The Distinctive-1869) included stories, serials, puzzles, etc. Both are important for bringing a lighter touch into the sober children's literature, as well as the idea of educating through entertainment. Between 1850 and 1920, many well-known literary personalities, authors and poets wrote for children. Şinasi and Ahmet Mithat translated the fables of La Fontaine, while Tevfik Fikret, Namık Kemal, Ziya Gökalp, İbrahim Alaaddin Gövsa, all famous poets of their time, also composed for children. Ahmed Rasim and Ömer Seyfeddin's novels and short stories are still beloved and read by children, and they are now considered as classics.

The Turkish children's theatre also has its roots in the 1910s. Reşat Nuri Güntekin, a famous novelist, realized the need for plays in schools and tried to write short plays to be performed therein. But the first and real children's theatre officially opened during the 1934-35 theatre season in İstanbul.

Despite the efforts of literary men, children's literature did not develop as one could have hoped for. One of the reasons was the economic impact of frequent wars, the last being the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922). In the 1920s, when the new Turkey emerged from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, there were still very few books suitable for children. Those were years of economical and social change. One of the major changes was that of the Arabic alphabet which gave way to the Latin one in 1928. Many old favorites were transcribed and re-published. Refik Halid Karay, Reşat Nuri Güntekin were some of the writers whose works were reprinted. The historical novels of Abdullah Ziya Kozanoğlu and Rakım Çalapala were read enthusiastically by older children.

In the 1940s, The Turkish Child Protection Society (Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu) sponsored the translation of one hundred children's classics from all parts of the world. This projects gave an impetus to children's literature. The well-known poet Orhan Veli Kanık will be remembered for his lucid and sensitive translation of La Fontaine's *Fables*.

Up to the 1950s Turkish children's literature was largely comprised of the classics, fairy tales, legends, fables and short stories. In the 1950s, a change in theme occurred, perhaps as a result of the budding Turkish democracy: social issues became the preferable subjects. Some of the well-read authors of short stories and novels of this kind are Talip Apaydın, Mehmet Seyda and Gülsen Dayıoğlu. Aziz Nesin and Rıfat Ilgaz were popular for their humorous writings. Eflatun Cem Güney with his poetic style retold the Turkish folk-tales.

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Starting with 1950s, more and more publishers became interested in children's literature. Doğan Kardeş was one of them. For many years, this company published a fine journal as well as good quality books, mostly translations from the classics. Publishers like Doğan Kardeş and Arkin Kitabevi arranged contests for the best story-book of the year. These contests were for books written for 7-year-olds and up. Picture books were at first few in number and poor in quality. However, by the 1960s, the wide usage of offset printing made it possible for an abundance of picture books to be published; at first these were mostly translations from the French ("Martine" series). 1979, the International Children's Year was the peak year for children's book publications in the seventies both in quality and quantity. After that, owing to the economic recession, the quality of paper and book production dropped again. At present there are only a few publishers like Arkin, Remzi, Milliyet, Arkadaş, Redhouse, Altın Kitaplar, Mavibulut, YA-PA who continue to publish good quality books. The Ministry of Culture gives considerable support to Turkish authors. In general, there is a growing degree of awareness as to children's needs and expectations as regards to literature; but the quantity of qualitative books are not as yet satisfactory.

Children's periodicals have not developed as well as books. At present, other than the bank-sponsored periodicals, there are only three main journals for children. These are published by Tercüman, Türkiye and Milliyet, all newspapers of wide circulation. However, a recent and note worthy addition must be mentioned here: "Kırmızı Fare", a monthly journal aimed at small children. Comics, whether translations or original, are produced in abundance mostly in the periodicals and read enthusiastically by children of all ages.

In poetry, Fazıl Hüsni Dağlarca, who won several international prizes, is the best known name. Mustafa Ruhi Şirin is one of the contemporary poets.

Categories other than novels, short stories and fairy tales are weak. Picture books are gaining more importance and author-illustrators like Serpil Ural, Can Göknil, Ruhsar Belen, Fatih Erdoğan are working specifically in this area. However, the trend with the publishers is to print picture-less material, this being less expensive and less troublesome.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that, despite the shortage of good quality books, the growing interest in and effort for preparing and publishing better ones gives one hope for the future of Turkish children's books.

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