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Current Issue

- [Alan Moore and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*](#)
- [A Canvas for Popular Dissent: *Zahra's Paradise*](#)
- [Maus: A Work of Graphic Sincerity](#)
- [Kate Beaton and the Irony of History-as-Comic](#)
- [Joe Sacco: Representing Palestine](#)

Categories

• Categories

- [Classics](#)
- [Creative Writing](#)
 - [Original Poetry](#)
- [Environment](#)
- [Essays](#)
- [History](#)
- [Interviews](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Literature](#)
 - [Autobiography](#)
 - [Biography](#)
 - [Critical Theory](#)
 - [Fiction](#)
 - [Literary Criticism](#)
 - [Non-fiction](#)
- [Writers](#)
- [Politics & Society](#)
 - [Economics](#)
 - [Social Policy](#)
 - [World Politics](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [The Arts](#)
 - [Film & TV](#)
 - [Music](#)
 - [Photo Essays](#)
 - [Photography](#)
 - [The Humanities Debate](#)
 - [Theatre](#)
 - [Visual Arts](#)
- [Translation](#)

[British Library](#) [Children's Literature](#) [Hannah Field](#)



• [Literature](#) •  

Tweet

Wonderful Accidents

Hannah Field



Picture This: Children's Illustrated Classics

British Library
4 October 2013 – 26 January 2014

Everyone's a critic. While I found Quentin Blake's pen-and-ink and monochrome wash illustration of Willy Wonka charming—a blend of manic whimsy and wild-eyed threat which is just right for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964)—a fellow gallery-goer at the exhibition 'Picture This: Children's Illustrated Classics', currently on show in the Folio Society Gallery at the British Library, loudly pronounced it 'something you'd find in the New Yorker magazine, not a children's book'. It is a remark that reflects the proprietorial feelings which children's literature often induces (not to mention the sense that even if not everyone could write or illustrate a children's book, then anyone can assess the merits of one). The exhibition at the BL, which showcases different illustrated versions of ten iconic British children's titles, suggests a related schism between a conception of children's books as a site of unthinking pleasure and as a site of hard-nosed aesthetic enquiry: a division physically realised in the mismatch between the exhibition space, with its unconventional house-shaped exhibition plinths and wall cut-outs and peepholes, and the prose style of the captions, which is at times a little ponderous. The awkwardness seems to relate also to a reluctance to acknowledge that the production of children's books is commercial rather than purely artistic. A sample demerit along these lines is the caption text chiding Michael Hague for the lack of 'geographical and historical accuracy' in his 1987 illustrations to Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, first serialised in 1910—these errors being hardly surprising, according to the caption, in light of an earlier candid statement from Hague about why he had repeatedly illustrated classic texts: 'Because the classics are there...and because once I'd done one, the publishers went on wanting more.' Regardless, though, there's much to enjoy here, with selected highlights being (along with the exhibition design) Rudyard Kipling's elephant from the *Just So Stories* (1902), the aforementioned work by Blake, and the delightfully lurid orange cover to Ted Hughes's *The Iron Man* (1968). Moreover, the video interviews with practitioners even provide something of an escape from the need to romance the origins and effects of children's literature. Ian Beck discussing his illustrations for *J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan and Wendy* (1998), a retelling of Barrie's work by Rose Impey, where he admits painting the original illustrations three-to-a-page because he produced them in tight quarters, and Lauren Child documenting the 'wonderful accidents' of her collage process (and her vexation at printers who try to erase evidence of such accidents), place children's books in refreshingly pragmatic contexts, complicating and deepening assessments of any finished product. Indeed, staging an exhibition of subsequent editions of classic texts insistently reminds the spectator of the book's contingency, rather than inviolability: an insistence that is welcome, not just in the context of the children's books, but the book more generally.

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