

Call for Papers

International Conference
13 and 14 November 2025

Max, Martine, Maya and C° Children's classics, masterpieces, and best- sellers: which heritage(s) to share?

International Conference organised by the French National Library (BnF) / National Centre for Children's Literature (CNLJ), with the support of L'Afreloce (French Research Society on Children's Books and Cultural Objects) and the project Sciences de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse (EnJe), Sorbonne Nouvelle University, Paris.

In 2008-2009, the exhibition "Babar, Harry Potter and C°" celebrated the inauguration of the National Centre for Children's Literature at the French National Library, marking in spectacular fashion the legitimization of children's books as cultural heritage. In a nod to this earlier event, new characters have been chosen (this time with a boy, a girl, and a bee.... it's 2025 after all!) to symbolise the continuation of these reflections.

Canonical texts, masterpieces, classics... whatever label they are given, there are some perennial texts that it is essential to know and must be preserved, for what they can still bring to today's children, teenagers and adults. This process of legitimization and integration into cultural heritage takes many forms. This conference will bring together researchers, creators and book and mediation professionals to interrogate this notion of the 'classic', which Italo Calvino famously defined as "a book that never finishes saying what it has to say".

The aim is not only to continue the reflections that began with the conference "Penser/Classer l'album classique" held at the University of Artois in 2021, and the publication by Sophie Van der Linden and Raphaële Botte for the National Centre for the Book [CNL], *100 classiques et merveilles pour la jeunesse* [100 classics and wonders for the young] in 2023, but also to find answers to the many questions raised by librarians responsible for updating their collections, many of whom signed up for the CNLJ course entitled "Classic picturebooks : books that shouldn't be thrown away". The specificities of children's literary classics will be explored: does children's literature, with the particular nature of its readership and modes of legitimization, operate differently from general literature (initial references to Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Flaubert were rejected), and does the passage of time constantly re-evaluate the appreciation of a work?

The very title of the conference suggests that our use of terminology needs to be questioned. Are we discussing the same thing when we use the words classic, heritage text, masterpiece, or canonical text? Does designating some works as classics or masterpieces necessarily preclude others from being considered worthy of interest? Can popular or mass market books produce classics, or does they have to come from a field recognized as literary? Should a bestseller de facto be considered a classic, given the breadth of its readership... or, to put it another way, does the *Martine* series, which has sold millions of copies, deserve to take its place alongside Maurice Sendak's Max, who has been the subject of multiple monographs and conferences? Moreover, the name Max could just as easily refer to the hero of the *Max and Lili* series, undisputed leader of public library loan rankings, as it could to Sendak's famous instigator of the "wild rumpus".

Paper proposals may focus on the following themes:

Legitimizing institutions

As Alain Viala points out, "to call something a 'classic', is to categorise it, and situate it within a hierarchy of values". The processes of legitimization of children's literature, "classicization", canonization and designation as cultural heritage need to be interrogated, as does the role of the various institutions involved – such as schools, libraries, publishers (through classic collections, re-editions and re-illustrations, translations and re-translations), booksellers, critics, researchers, book festivals and fairs, literary prizes, exhibitions, and social media, etc.

- What are the criteria used by institutions that award certain titles at the expense of others? What is the specificity of children's publishing in these processes of legitimization?
- How homogeneous are the corpora identified by different actors?
- What are the differences between countries, depending on whether the legitimizing bodies belong to the educational or cultural spheres, and whether they promote "national" works or, alternatively, those open to works from abroad?
- Do works from non-"legitimate" genres (such as thrillers or romances) stand a chance of achieving classic status?
- Does the proliferation of literary salons and prizes blur or reinforce the specificity of certain titles? Do prizes reward one-off works, or rather an author for their entire career?
- What role do young readers play in these processes? Can literary recognition only be bestowed by adults? Do recent forms of peer recommendation (such as teenage booktubers and booktokers) constitute new forms of legitimization?
- What are the key issues from a conservation perspective between cultural legitimacy and libraries' need to carry out "weeding" of their collections? What is the role played by policies on digitisation and publishing corpora online, at a time when the carbon footprint from the energy required to preserve virtual data is further exacerbating the issue of storage space?

Temporality

"It is better to let the success of a book become more clearly defined, profound and consolidated over time", replied Marc Soriano cautiously when asked in 1973 for a list of classics for young people. The question of the relationship with time is indeed central to the notion of a classic, which suggests a timeless quality while simultaneously reflecting the spirit of its time. As Antoine Compagnon said of Proust at the Collège de France: "each generation renews the meaning and scope of this work, enriches it, takes possession of it. [...] The classic text is one that never ceases to disturb." This resistance to the passage of time ensures these texts and characters figure in the collective unconscious and form a source of inspiration - whether they are conscious of it or not - for contemporary creators.

- can the list of canonical texts be extended indefinitely?

- do images and texts age differently?
- does canonization work only on a text in its entirety, or rather does it operate using episodes, or “selected extracts” of the work?
- accessibility of works and the perpetuation (or not) of their ‘classic’ status: how and why do publishers choose to keep (or not) titles available in their collections, and what criteria do they use to decide which titles to reissue, and with what aims? How do libraries/bookshops decide which titles to keep on the shelves?
- how does peer legitimization work? What are the strategies (imitation, citation, rewriting and reinterpretation) used by contemporary authors and illustrators to pay homage to previous generations?

Literature and society

Children's literature always reflects the values that a society, at any given time and in any given place, wishes to pass on to its younger generations. These values evolve over time and space. In the case of the international circulation of works, translation can lead to transformations of the original work, as was the case in Pierre-Jules Hetzel's translations of *Little Women* [rendered as *The Four Daughters of Dr Marsh*] in the 19th century, or the transformation of Pippi Longstocking into Fifi Brindacier [Fifi Little-bit-of-steel] in France in the 1950s-1960s, in which the subversive nature of the character was toned down.

- In the case of international heritage and a sort of globalized corpus of classics, how do these works circulate, and what is at stake in their translations and adaptations?
- What is the relationship between classics/bestsellers/long-sellers and social issues (such as discussions around feminism or racism), and how are such books being read today in a radically different context?
- How is the revival of certain texts being played out, particularly the trend for recovering older books on social media?
- how can female authors or and authors from minoritised backgrounds who have been forgotten or erased from the canon be restored and valorised?
- How have the major debates that have taken place in the United States called into question the very notion of the “canon” since the advent of the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements? Has the move in English-speaking scholarship and activist circles to consider the canon as a vector for excluding authors who are racialised or from economically disadvantaged backgrounds provoked comparable discussions in France?

Literature and reception

Children's literature can have multiple audiences, thanks to its polysemy, variety and richness of interpretation. “In this [conventional] space, we create a universe in which adults and children can dialogue and communicate” (Joëlle Turin). As readers grow older, they may re-read the same book and find different things in it. For each age group they pass through, they are also confronted with new classics. Reception also depends on the degree of mediation through which the child accesses the book: they may have been imposed by educational or family settings (“classics are books that adults want us to read at all costs”) or, on the contrary, the completely freely by the reader (Marc Soriano: “a book which the child always picks up of their own accord and for pleasure”). In most cases, the answer is probably somewhere in between, and with the support of numerous mediators... and provided that the books are easily accessible, without discrimination in terms of classification, storage, etc.

- What role do creators play in the preservation of a work (reading versus “writing” in the broadest sense)?

- what role does the singularity of reception play in the process of creating a classic: is this a classic in just one person's opinion/ or is it a classic for all?

Literature and transmedia

Of the three names featured in the title of our conference, Maya refers to the title of a novel by Waldemar Bonsels published in 1912 (*Die Biene Maja und ihre Abenteuer*), a character popularized in the 1970s by the German-Japanese cartoon *Maya the Bee*. What happens when classics move from one medium to another?

- Does the integration of books into a multimedia universe (films, plays, shows, games and merchandising) ensure their continued presence?
- while adaptations help to ensure the survival of classic texts, do they not also risk leading to the "forgetting" of the original works?
- in today's highly visual society, is the remediation in images (illustrated editions, graphic novel adaptations) a necessary condition for success?

Conference organisers

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Milena Šubrtová, Masaryk University
Hélène Valotteau, Fonds patrimonial Heure joyeuse, médiathèque Françoise-Sagan (Paris)
Sophie Van der Linden, literary critic and expert on children's picturebooks

How to send paper proposals and timeline

The conference will be held on Thursday 13th November 2025, in the Petit auditorium of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (**Paris 13^e**), and Friday 14th November 2025, at the Centre de colloques [Conference Centre] of the Campus Condorcet (**Aubervilliers**).

This is an international conference. The languages of the conference are French and English.

Deadline for sending proposals: **7th May 2025**

Please send proposals to: virginie.meyer@bnf.fr

Paper proposals will contain the following:

- paper title
- abstract (approx. 500 words)
- 5 key words
- a short bibliography
- a short biography of the author, including university affiliation, email address and contact number
- the document will be sent in PDF format under the file name of the person submitting the proposal: Surname_firstname.pdf

Proposal decisions will be communicated: **June 2025**

Speaker travel and accommodation expenses will not be covered by the event organisers.

Papers will be recorded for posting online on the BnF and partner websites.

A publication is envisaged to extend the reflections and exchanges arising from this conference.

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