

Period: From Isolationism to Internationalism,
1940-1990.

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U.S. Children's Books about the World War II Period: From Isolationism to Internationalism, 1940-1990

Caroline C. Hunt

The Lion and the Unicorn

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

U.S. Children's Books about the World War II Period:
From Isolationism to Internationalism, 1940-1990

Caroline C. Hunt (bio)

Children's books published during the early 1940s in the United States rarely mention the war that the country finally entered in December 1941. These books do not simply omit war-related plots and overseas settings; in most of them, people go about their business as if there were no war on at all. At first, this statement may seem exaggerated, even wrong. Surely there are dozens, even hundreds of stories about the home front, as well as Nazi books, spy books, army nurse books, and bomber pilot books. And what about books that show the horror of the Holocaust? On closer analysis, though, nearly the whole corpus of nonpulp World War II books for juvenile readers in the United States turns out to have been written considerably later. In the juvenile fiction of the 1940s (or any other decade of this century) in the United States, the war is rarely treated as what it actually was for most children—an ever-present background to daily life. Real children in the war years felt the effects of rationing, helped with victory gardens, and collected metal scrap. Their fathers and older brothers, and perhaps some of their young aunts, were in uniform. If they lived on the East Coast, they had blackouts and air raid drills; on the West Coast, they knew of classmates or former neighbors in Japanese-American internment centers. Though spared the experiences of bombings, occupation, and extermination camps, U.S. children in the war years lived in an atmosphere radically different from that of peacetime. Little of this found its way into the books they read until many years later.

The treatment of World War II in U.S. children's books mirrors the change in the popular view of the war over the past fifty years very accurately. An examination of five significant juvenile titles in the early **[End Page 190]** 1940s shows how late isolationism lingered and how strenuously, by resorting either to fantasy or to a spurious normalcy, writers denied the possibility of war. A second section contrasts British and American ideas of what was appropriate information for children and outlines efforts on the part of U.S. authors and reviewers to downplay the relevance of the war when it actually came closer to home. Third, a

brief look at pulp adventures and at indirect adaptations of war themes (such as historical novels) suggests a continuing need for most juvenile writers to avoid confronting the war seriously. Finally, a consideration of some retrospective stories of the late 1960s and the 1970s suggests that the war was still, at that time, "unfinished business" for many writers and, perhaps, for their audiences.

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No one would have guessed, from the books that were available to young readers from late 1939 through early 1941, that most of Europe was at war. The first eighteen months of direct U.S. involvement in the war, from December 1941 to mid-1943, also went virtually unmarked by authors in the juvenile market outside of subliterary pulp fiction. Books for children and young adults in this period may be divided into two groups: those that turn to fantasy in their resolute exclusion of wartime reality and those that retain an uneasy normalcy but still exclude actual mention of the war.

First, I will explore the fantastic. Some of the most successful books of this period, by male and female writers alike, suggest an idyllic and peaceful world in radical opposition to the reality of war. In 1940-1941, three enduring best sellers of the juvenile publishing scene appeared. All three are still in print, all three became successful films, and two appeared later as television series. Two of the three were followed by sequels. They were Walter Farley's *The Black Stallion*, Mary O'Hara's *My Friend Flicka*, and Eric Knight's *Lassie Come-Home*.

The first of these is most obviously fantastic; it is almost like a daydream. Readers may not have remarked upon the absence of the gathering clouds of war in this first book—produced before...

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
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