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Get your Kid's Lit on!

The Boston Globe

The rise of political books for children

By Christopher Dreher, 12/14/2003

AS ANN COULTER and Al Franken duke it out on the bestseller lists, the ideological battle of the books shows signs of moving to another realm. Just in time for the holidays, a handful of ideologically motivated publishers have launched new imprints for children.

For conservative families on your shopping list, there's The National Review Treasury of Classic Children's Literature (ISI), with stories by such canonical writers as Lewis Carroll, Rudyard Kipling, and Louisa May Alcott. William F. Buckley Jr. himself selected the stories from his magazine's collection of back issues of St. Nicholas Magazine, a popular turn-of-the-century periodical "for Young Folks." More than 10,000 copies of "Treasury" have been sold so far to National Review subscribers.

"In our day and age, there are a lot of beautifully illustrated books [for kids], but most suffer from a basic dumbing down. These stories are perquisites to reading great literature," says Jeff Nelson, founder and publisher of ISI Books, the 10-year-old publishing arm of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, an organization dedicated to promoting conservative scholarship.

ISI is also offering "Everyday Graces: A Child's Book of Good Manners," an anthology edited by Karen Santorum, who even got her husband, Senator Rick Santorum, Republican of Pennsylvania, to contribute a fable. Mrs. Santorum uses a mix of classic and contemporary authors, interspersed with relevant biblical quotes, to promote neglected courtesies such as "Helping Out At Home," "Taming the Tongue" and "Respecting the American Flag." "Unfortunately, in our day, respect and attention to good manners has diminished," she writes in a Note to Parents. "Whereas individual rights and self-expression have become an obsession."

On the left-hand side of the bookshelf is Red Rattle Books, the new imprint of the Brooklyn-based Soft Skull Press, publisher of such titles as "Bomb the Suburbs" and "Get Your War On." Red Rattle's premiere title, "The Saddest Little Robot" by Brian Gage, is a futuristic fable about a maladjusted robot who struggles to free the working robots from the greedy upper echelon that controls their society. A forthcoming book, provisionally titled "Hey, Kidz! Buy this Book: A Radical Primer on Corporate and Governmental Marketing Tactics and Artistic Activism for Short People," advises children and parents on how to counter the wiles of commercialism.

"We felt there needed to be more subversive children's books," says publisher Richard Nash, "books that undermine the forces that make kids conform, though one thing we're trying to avoid is to create a new conformity." He continues, "Kids know when they're getting manipulated. `Heather Has Two Mommies': they see right through that stuff. I think it's more valuable to give children the critical tools and show them how to use them. If 10 percent end up being rabid Republicans, well, that's just life."

Meanwhile, New York Review Books, the publishing arm of the Manhattan-based journal, launches its Children's Collection of reprints this month. Rather than ideology, the titles reflect a cosmopolitan spirit. Esther Averill's collection, "Jenny and the Cat Club," originally published in 1973, follows the adventures of an urbane Greenwich Village feline, while Italian Dino Buzzati's 1947 classic, "The Bears' Famous Invasion of Sicily," recounts a clan of winter-ravaged bears' misadventures in the Italian countryside.

"There's a moral or ethical commitment in any kind of writing, though that's different from moralizing," says editorial director Edwin Frank. "I'm not interested in a William Bennett type of virtue for virtue's sake, though these books have all sorts of virtues."

Christopher Dreher has written for Salon.com and other publications.

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