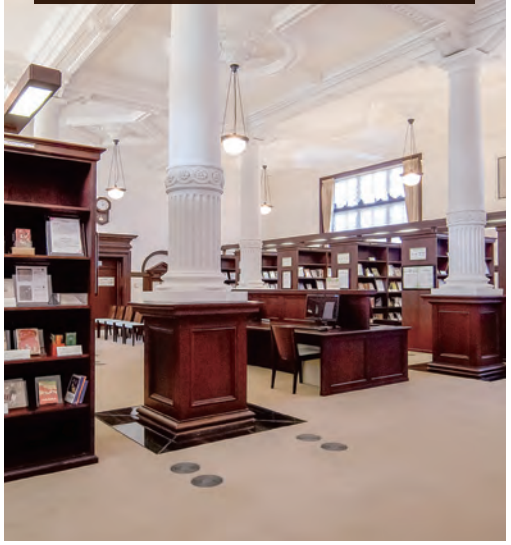
Gallery of Children's Literature



The Gallery of Children's Literature is a permanent exhibition room for Japanese children's books published since the Meiji era.

Around 1,500 items are exhibited in this room. All are available for anyone to read.

International Library of Children's Literature
国立国会図書館 国際子ども図書館

Children's Fiction

I. The Beginnings of Children's Fiction in Japan

Japan's first children's magazine *Shōnen en* (Child's Garden) launched in 1888, followed by *Shōkokumin* (Young National), *Shōnen sekai* (Child's World), *Nihon shōnen* (Japanese Boy), *Yōnen no tomo* (Young Child's Companion), and other magazines. *Shōnen sekai*, edited by Sazanami Iwaya, came to represent these Meiji-period publications, and Iwaya's story *Koganemaru* ("A Dog Named Kogane," 1891) became an early example of creative fiction for children. Mimei Ogawa's first collection of children's stories, *Akai fune* (Red Boat, 1910), also represents a starting point for modern children's fiction. While Sazanami's *otogibanashi* (fairy tales) were in the tradition of *setsuwa* (legends of old), Mimei's *dōwa* (children's stories) featured poetic and figurative language and a *märchen*, or fairy tale, world.

II. Launch of *Akai tori* through the Prewar Period: Age of *Dōwa*

In the 1918 inaugural issue of the magazine *Akai tori* (Red Bird), the following declaration appears: "*Akai tori* . . . is in the vanguard of an epoch-making movement to preserve and develop the purity of children by gathering together the sincere efforts of the best artists of today and encouraging the creative work of young writers for children." The phrase "purity of children" reflects a Taishō-period view of children (one later criticized by proletarian children's author and critic Kusuro Makimoto, who branded it "pure heart of children-ism," or *dōshin shugi*). After *Akai tori*, a number of other children's story magazines were founded, including *Kin no fune* (The Golden Boat), later renamed *Kin no hoshi* (The Golden Star), as well as *Dōwa* (Children's Stories) and *Otogi no sekai* (The World of Fairy Tales), all of which fostered the flowering of *dōshin*—literally "child's heart"—literature. Stories and songs in this vein came to be written in great quantity.

III. Postwar Period through the 1970s: The Birth of Contemporary Children's Fiction

After World War II ended, authors searched for ways to portray themes appropriate to the realities of postwar life. They struggled at first. The contemporary children's fiction of Japan is thought to have been established in 1959, with the publication of Satoru Sato's *Dare mo shiranai chīsa na kuni* (A Little Country No One Knows) and Tomiko Inui's *Kokage no ie no kobito tachi* (published in English as *The Secret of the Blue Glass*). While *dōwa* were short works that featured poetry, figurative language, and imagined worlds, contemporary children's fiction used long-form prose to describe real circumstances affecting children. Children's fiction had to grapple with both the war that readers had experienced, and the society that had started the war.

IV. The 1980s and 1990s: Currents in Children's Fiction

While still in its infancy, contemporary children's fiction was written with the idealistic view that children can overcome their problems with their own power, and their circumstances can improve. Later, the idea that problems can always be solved was questioned. One book that questioned idealism was Masamoto Nasu's *Bokura wa umi e* (We'll Go Out to the Sea), a novel in which young people leave a hard reality behind, and go out to sea on a tiny raft. After this novel, children's fiction left behind the idealism that led to formulaic stories, and developed in diverse ways leading into the 2000s.

V. The 21st Century

Since the 1970s, Japanese children's fiction has taken up themes once kept at a distance, such as sex, death, and family breakdown, from the perspective that such issues elucidate human nature. In fact, purely in terms of theme, children's literature has become indistinguishable from adult literature. The range of people who read contemporary children's fiction has also expanded, to include middle and high school students and adults. This has led to development of the young adult (YA) category in Japan. YA literature can be seen as a rich harvest from the cultivation of contemporary children's literature; at the same time, if one considers readers of children's literature to be grade school children, YA can represent a hollowing out. Where will Japanese children's books head next?

(Supervised by Takeo Miyakawa)

Special Reading Room

Gallery of Children's Literature

The Brick Building of the International Library of Children's Literature is Japan's former Imperial Library, which dates from 1906. The Gallery of Children's Literature is housed in what was once the Special Reading Room, a room which researchers needed special permission from the Librarian to use. The walls and ceilings of the room have been preserved and restored exactly as they were. The four decorative plaster orders are the grand centerpiece of this room.

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国立国会図書館 National Diet Library, Japan

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Picture Books

I. Meiji and Taishō Periods: Picture Books as a New Era Dawns

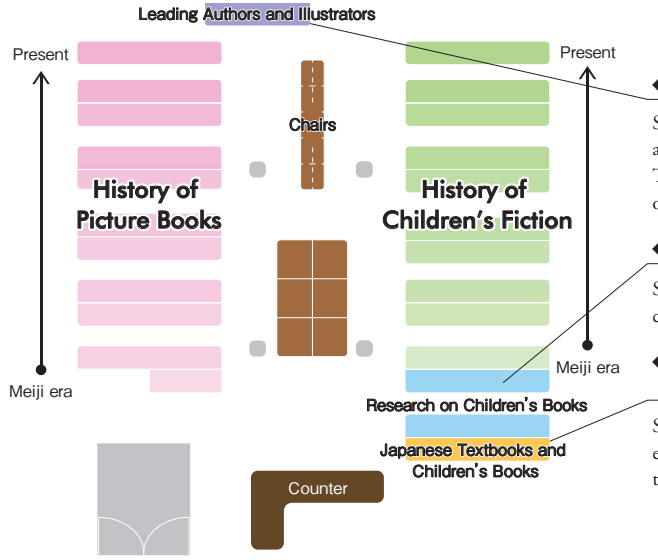
From the early to middle Meiji period, Japan's *kusazōshi*, or popular woodblock-printed books, included folktale books for children such as *akahon* (books with red covers) and *chirimen bon* (crepe-paper books with text in European languages). The contemporary concept of the picture book had not yet taken hold. Government policies of "rich nation, strong army" and "encourage industry" led to the development of printing technology and changes in book distribution. In addition, the establishment of early childhood education led to experiments in creating books that were enjoyable and easy for children to understand. Finally, twenty years after Japan opened to the world, translated picture books appeared that combined European culture with Japanese art. In the early 1900s, color printing increased rapidly, and picture books in the form of *gajō* (picture albums) and *ebanashi* (illustrated stories) appeared.

II. Taishō and Prewar Periods: Age of Art for Children

The Taishō period (1912-1926) saw an emphasis on child-centered education, founded on respect of the child's self and individuality. Belief in the "purity of children's hearts" spread, leading to the pursuit of artistic quality in children's books. As children's magazines such as *Akai tori* (Red Bird) appeared, picture magazines that could be enjoyed even by infants were also printed one after another, featuring high-quality artwork. Artists who had studied Western art or Japanese painting competed with one another and excelled, creating not merely illustrations but art for children that stood on its own. The picture magazines declined during wartime, but art for children would be taken up again after the war.

III. Postwar Period and the 1950s: Birth of the Contemporary Picture Book

Shortly after the surrender in 1945, Japan's meager resources were marshalled to publish numerous picture books and children's magazines, in hopes of filling children's hearts. The Japanese publishing industry underwent reorganization beginning in about 1950. Editors, researchers, and translators combined forces, searching for ways to create a new kind of Japanese picture book. The *Iwanami no kodomo no hon* (Iwanami Children's Books) series, launched in 1953 with emphasis on translated picture books, greatly influenced the picture books to follow. The *Kodomo no tomo* (Child's Companion) series, launched in 1956 with one picture book issued per month for the very young, proved an era-defining experiment.



◆Leading Authors and Illustrators

Section introducing works by leading authors and illustrators of children's books. The works on display are changed depending on the theme.

◆Research on Children's Books

Section introducing academic works on children's books

◆Japanese Textbooks and Children's Books

Section introducing the stories included in elementary school textbooks, along with the textbooks

Digital Exhibition

"Japanese Children's Literature: A History from the International Library of Children's Literature Collections"

https://www.kodomo.go.jp/jcl/e/index.html

This online exhibition presents around 450 works of the leading authors and illustrators in each period since the Meiji era.

IV. The 1960s and 1970s: Golden Age of Picture Books

Of the picture books currently known as million-sellers in Japan, most come from the 1960s, represented by *Guri to Gura* (Guri and Gura, 1963) and *Inai inai bā!* (Peek-a-Boo, 1967). The decade with the next most million-sellers is the 1970s, represented by 100 *Man-kai ikita neko* (The Cat That Lived a Million Times, 1977). The 1960s and 1970s have been called the Golden Age of Picture Books. It is possible to see the fruits of postwar study of Western picture books, in the Japanese picture books of this time. Against the backdrop of rapid economic growth and fueled by a rise in reading promotion, vibrant picture books with a revolutionary energy infused the culture. In the 1970s, the number of picture book titles published per year topped one thousand, and Japan had a Picture Book Boom. The specialist magazine *Gekkan ehon* (Picture Book Monthly) launched, and bookstores specializing in children's books opened nationwide. In addition, beginning with the Bologna Children's Book Fair Illustrators' Exhibition, collections of picture book art began to be displayed in art museums.

V. The 1980s and 1990s: Pursuit of Individuality and Expression

In the 1980s, the environment surrounding children began to evolve. In addition to a lower birth rate, this decade brought the spread of video games, and explosive popularity for anime, videos, and manga. Children reading less became a hot topic. The Picture Book Boom of the 1970s ended, and the thinking about picture books began to change. Authors grew less beholden to tradition and pursued new, individual means of expression. On the other hand, picture book research that had been in progress since the postwar era began to bear fruit. Japanese picture books gained an international reputation, with the Hans Christian Andersen Award going to Suekichi Akaba (1980), and Mitsumasa Anno (1984). In the 1990s, picture book creators, editors, and researchers worked to enliven further the world of the picture book. The concept of the picture book as art also gained influence.

VI. The 21st Century: New Forms of Hope

In the early 2000s, two small picture book booms occurred. One of them, foretold by the million-seller trends of the late twentieth century, was a boom in picture book appreciation by adults. The other was a read-aloud boom, which emphasized reading picture books not only in households but also to groups. In the background was the National Year of Reading in 2000, which brought an increase in reading promotion. Even as such developments widened the age range of picture book readers, they also influenced publishing trends. Picture books are, after all, a form of culture that reflects the times and society. Classic titles with established reputations, which have been read and reread for decades, retain clear appeal. But let us also examine books that the adults of today provide for the children of today, complete with twenty-first century messages and trends.

(Supervised by Yukiko Hiromatsu)