

Shifting Values in Global Children’s Literature: A Comparative Thematic Analysis from 2001 to 2025

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ABSTRACT

Children’s literature reflects how societies teach younger generations moral reasoning, empathy, and cultural identity. Over the past two decades, global children’s literature has undergone significant shifts in theme and form, reflecting broader social and technological changes. This study examines the evolution of ethical functions, representation, and narrative media in children’s literature across three phases: 2001–2009, 2010–2019, and 2020–2025. Using a qualitative comparative design and reflexive thematic analysis, the research examines award-winning and internationally circulated works to identify shifting values and patterns in storytelling practices. Findings indicate that the literary works of the early 2000s, dominated by fantasy and dystopia, deliver the moral laboratories where young readers practiced ethical judgment within imagined worlds. The 2010s redirected this focus toward realism, inclusion, and social participation, highlighting the rise of own-voices authors and multimodal formats such as verse and graphic novels. In the 2020s, children’s literature has increasingly engaged with real-world crises—pandemics, racial justice, climate anxiety, and mental health—transforming stories into tools for recovery, empathy, and digital literacy. Across these three periods, children’s literature moves from imagining moral choices to enabling real ethical action, from representing diversity to institutionalizing it, and from textual storytelling to interactive, cross-media experiences. This evolution demonstrates that children’s literature is no longer a passive reflection of cultural change but actively shapes global empathy and civic awareness among young readers.

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1. Introduction

Children’s literature plays a crucial role in the emotional, social, cognitive, cultural, and academic development of children, while also serving as a vehicle for identity formation and promoting social justice. As an artistic tool, it provides a safe space through characters, conflicts, and resolutions that help children recognize, label, and regulate emotions (emotional socialization), while practicing empathy, perspective-taking, and ethical reasoning in contexts that are close to their lived experiences (Tammasse et al., 2019; Lanta et al., 2022; Rahman & Amir, 2019; Junaid et al., 2023). Intentional exposure to diverse texts in educational settings further strengthens critical literacy and a sense of belonging, particularly for marginalized groups (McNeil, 2012). These stories explore courage and cause-and-effect. They invite children to question traditional ideas of human identity and see new connections between humans and the non-human world (Jaques, 2015; Persky, 2018; Gregory and Laverty, 2022; Tammasse et al., 2025; Junaid et al., 2025).

Children’s literature leaves a lasting positive impression and promotes learning among its audience, especially children. Fantasy literature helps children cope with life’s difficulties, hope for a better future, and manage negative emotions such as fear or frustration (Goldstein and Russ, 2000; Griesinger, 2002; Suma et al., 2026; Nahdhiyah et al., 2022). It influences how children view the world (Myles et al., 1992; Hann and Hagelman, 2021) and it supports the development of problem-solving and decision-making skills (Konrad, Helf and Itoi, 2007; Jumriati et al., 2021; Mahdori et al., 2025).

Children’s literature is widely understood not merely as entertainment, but as an ethical and ideological medium that negotiates identity, justice, and agency. (Bradford, 2011; Tammasse et al., 2022; Suma et al., 2023; Junaid et al., 2026). Cross-cultural research reveals that narratives shape childhood in accordance with local sociocultural contexts—

from the Confucian, Modern, and Maoist child in China to colonial-era Javanese texts employed for cultural resistance and indigenous education (Tesar *et al.*, 2019; Sagita Krissandi, Andayani and Anindyarini, 2023). Children's books serve as a critical pedagogy in classrooms, fostering democratic literacy, teacher reflexivity, and awareness of bias (Souto-Manning, 2009; Flores, Vlach and Lammert, 2019; Nganga, 2020). Representation remains central: portrayals of disability oscillate between deficit and empowerment, while even secular stories carry moral–spiritual imagery (Myles *et al.*, 1992; Leon, 1997; O'sullivan, 2006; Bialka, Hansen and Wong, 2023). Recent work extends moral imagination toward ecological and posthuman frames that link eco- and social justice and decenter the human (Persky, 2018; Hann and Hagelman, 2021; Hindhede, 2024). Concurrently, digital and multimodal forms recast reading and authorship, positioning young readers as co-creators (de Rijke, 2021; Metscher and Wong, 2021; Unsworth, 2023). Literature supports the use of SEL (Self Emotional Learning) and coping strategies, providing language for moral reasoning, Self-Emotional curiosity, and inquiry (Goldstein and Russ, 2000; Flanagan *et al.*, 2013).

Over the past five years, the field has converged around four linked shifts: toward social–ecological justice, decolonized representation, multimodality/digital forms, and the coupling of emotional well-being with civic action. In eco/planetary literacy, higher-education courses now intentionally braid ecojustice with social justice; classroom studies show students using children's books to make ethical sense of uneven climate impacts and community rights (Hindhede, 2024), while climate fiction is framed as a grief-to-action pathway and book-club “slow reading” centers dialogue, emotion, and youth agency (Williams *et al.*, 2024; Murphy, 2025). Decolonization efforts extend beyond symbolic inclusion to reallocate epistemic authority across writing, editing, and distribution, with new work on linguistic authenticity mapping African American Language in books on slavery and the Civil Rights movement to avoid patronizing or stereotyped portrayals (Ford, 2024; Pittman *et al.*, 2024). Multimodal/digital trends demand multiliteracies: cross-media comparisons reveal point-of-view shifts between print and animation, LGBTQ picturebooks often encode stance and relationships visually, and sensorial (e.g., olfactory) picturebooks expand the interpretive repertoire (Kucirkova and Tosun, 2024; Moya-Guijarro, 2024). Together, these developments link emotional literacy to civic participation, moving readers from understanding to imagining collective responses, while critical attention to language/identity and publishing infrastructures reframes literacy itself as an ethical competence for plural societies.

Since the 2000s, the literary field has undergone rapid expansion and significant shifts. This is evident in popular children's literature trends that have garnered major awards and wide public acceptance. Yet alongside this growth is the challenge of understanding how the values embedded in these works have changed over time. Children's literature has kept pace with the times for more than two decades, actively reflecting and shaping new ways of thinking about morality, identity, and social relations. This highlights the need for research that can comprehensively track the direction of these shifts.

Based on this background, the present study is guided by two core research questions:

1. How have narratives' form and ethical function in global children's literature shifted across 2001–2009, 2010–2019, and 2020–2025, particularly in how they construe the relationships among morality, social representation, and the everyday contexts of young readers?
2. How do transformations in the publishing ecosystem, identity representation, and narrative media (fantasy to realism, print to multimodal and digital) reflect broader changes in values and pedagogical orientations in contemporary children's literature?

These two questions provide the foundation for tracing how children's literature functions as a reflection of societal values and as an instrument of social and cultural change across generations.

Ultimately, this study aims to uncover the shifts in value in children's literature. There will be many children's works from various parts of the world; the researcher will focus on award-winning titles to curate works that are otherwise only locally popular and to identify children's literature that is recognized globally. This study will provide a comprehensive reference for understanding how values in children's literature have developed from the early 2000s to 2025.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative–comparative design with a reflexive thematic analysis to map and compare thematic patterns in global children's literature across three periods: 2001–2009, 2010–2019, and 2020–2025. Its primary aim is to explain shifts in narrative function, changes in patterns of representation and the publishing ecosystem, and the evolution of forms/media from experimental to mainstream. The analysis is conducted at two levels: text (title/series) and

paratext (year of publication, awards, format, country/language, and descriptive characteristics of the work), thereby enabling consistent cross-decade comparisons.

Data were assembled through document curation for the specified periods and then enriched with standard metadata. The sampling strategy was purposive. Selection criteria included works that won or were shortlisted for major awards, circulated cross-nationally via translation or adaptation, represented a range of genres and formats (fantasy, social realism, historical; graphic novels, verse novels, picture books, hybrids), and addressed key issues such as identity/race, migration/refugees, ecology, mental health, gender, and disability. Titles with limited circulation were excluded.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Result

The *testing ground* idea in 2001–2009 fantasy–dystopia is most visible when alternative worlds compress ethical dilemmas into clear rules, punishments, and consequences, allowing young readers to safely experience what it feels like to obey, to defy, and then to bear the consequences.

It can clearly be seen in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003) that the usually warm wizarding school becomes a constraining bureaucracy under the rule of Dolores Umbridge. Bans, inspections, and *Educational Decrees* turn Hogwarts into a miniature politics of compliance. When Harry, Hermione, and their friends form Dumbledore's Army, their choice is not merely to break school rules but to test the boundary between obedience for the sake of order and obedience that drifts into hypocrisy. Readers are invited to consider when conscience requires resistance and compliance amounts to ignoring injustice.

System pressure is laid bare more starkly in spectacle dystopias. *The Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins, 2008) explores how a totalitarian state utilizes violence as entertainment to instill fear and maintain compliance. From live broadcasts to the cosmetic gloss of "sponsors," the Games expose an anatomy of control like censorship, spectacle, and dehumanization. When Katniss chooses solidarity, honoring Rue and defying the endgame rules with Peeta, here readers see how small acts of defiance can rattle the official narrative. A similar note, with different psychological pressure, appears in *The Ask and the Answer* (Patrick Ness, 2009), where propaganda and the manipulation of inner voices highlight how power corrodes language, trust, and decision-making.

In the steampunk domain, *Mortal Engines* (Philip Reeve, 2001) turns a ravenous social machine, a city that preys on other cities, into an allegory of industrialization devouring ecology. Here, world-building is not mere mechanical decoration. It forces characters like Tom and Hester to question the ethics of the system they inherit. Every choice that ignores "Municipal Darwinism" or resisting carries environmental and human costs. Readers learn through the characters' journey that "progress" without critique can harden into a logic of annihilation.

Mythic remixes provide a unique proving ground. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (Rick Riordan, 2005) relocates Greek gods to modern America to test adolescent agency within a fragile family. Percy's split identity (human–divine, child–hero) compels him to reevaluate his loyalty to parents, friends, or the camp community, as he learns that power without responsibility only perpetuates cycles of conflict. By contrast, *Artemis Fowl* (Eoin Colfer, 2001) fuses high-tech fairies with family capitalism, giving us a protagonist who begins amoral and gradually learns to trade cold cunning for empathy. Together, these works demonstrate that a magical inheritance or noble blood does not inherently make a character right and that moral maturity is a process, not a predetermined destiny. Magical institutions are also used to chart the politics of power and resistance in cynical and reflective ways. *The Bartimaeus Trilogy* (Jonathan Stroud, 2003–2006) exposes a magician regime that props up a ruling class through contracts with djinn. Bartimaeus's sardonic narration reveals the pretenses of magical bureaucracy while showing the moral price Nathaniel pays as he chases ambition. Readers do not simply see good versus evil, but how structures, privilege, and everyday compromises shape and corrode character. By contrast, *Skulduggery Pleasant* (Derek Landy, 2007) and *How to Train Your Dragon* (Cressida Cowell, 2003) employ humor and subversion to subvert hero tropes: courage often springs from imperfection, and laughter can be a means to challenge ossified authority.

Urban fantasy, such as *Un Lun Dun* (China Miéville, 2007), with its concept of the "hero who is not the Chosen One," flips the logic of prophecy. When Deeba, not becoming the Chosen One, saves the alternate world, readers are invited to question the myth of elite heroism. Meanwhile, the warmly gothic *The Graveyard Book* (Neil Gaiman, 2008; Newbery 2009) examines the meaning of family and care across the boundary of life and death. In a cemetery that ought to be frightening, Bod grows up within a found family network that nurtures his courage. Together, these works expand the

“testing ground” from large-scale politics to the intimate spaces of friendship and family: how love, grief, and moral duty reinforce one another.

It is essential to remember that the protagonists of this period are not born heroes; they become heroes by learning and making amends. Harry begins as an angry, impulsive teen, much like Katniss, who negotiates between the instinct to survive and a sense of justice; Percy reorganizes his loyalties amid adult conflicts, and Nathaniel bears the consequences of his ambition. Moral transformation is not a form of narration, but a sequence of small decisions with real consequences for oneself, friends, and the world. This pattern helps readers, especially children, view ethics as a recurring practice, rather than a single heroic act that resolves everything.

Pedagogically, the strength of these texts lies in their ability to initiate discussions on concrete dilemmas. Umbridge’s rule-making scenes in *Order of the Phoenix* are ideal for debating compliance and justice; the ending of *The Hunger Games* sparks questions and answers about public solidarity and civic risk; the predator cities in *Mortal Engines* open conversations about development and sustainability; the institutional satire in *Bartimaeus* trains students to distinguish between legitimate authority and manipulative authority. Teachers can ask students to map characters’ decisions, assess their impact on individuals, community, and environment, and then write reflections: “*If I were in that position, what would I do, and why?*” Furthermore, teachers can use their classrooms as a space to consider literary works of this period and to train students to make meaningful decisions. In some recent studies also pointed to how teachers use the discussion space in these literary works as material for engagement in their classes (Yu *et al.*, 2022; Morales, 2023; Abdirizak Abshir, 2025).

The fantasy–dystopia of 2001–2009 shows that popular genres can serve as tools for learning ethics, citizenship, and eco-technology without sacrificing the pleasures of story. All those literary works mentioned employ world-building to ignite questions that still matter today: when does obeying rules count as responsibility, when does it become silence, and how does civic courage emerge from a chain of honest, small choices? That is where moral reasoning, civic literacy, and ecological sensitivity find their training ground.

3.2 Discussion

In this section, the findings on literary works are compared with their trends from 2001 to 2009, from 2010 to 2019, and from 2020 to 2025. Literary works in the period 2010 to 2019. In general, literary works from this period exhibit significant differences, as the author’s own voice began to take root, not only becoming a trend but also having a profound impact on readers, giving rise to various movements. In literary works in the period 2020 to 2025. Literary works in this period are mostly themed around recovery, inviting the world to recover from the tragedy of the pandemic.

3.2.1 Comparison of 2001–2009 vs 2010–2019 Children’s Literature

Based on the findings, from 2001 to 2009, the global face of children’s literature rested on three pillars: fantasy/dystopia as a moral laboratory or testing ground, widening representation (race, culture, class) beginning to enter the mainstream, and formal experimentation (graphic, highly illustrated, interactive) that was still regarded as new. The 2010–2019 decade inherited this foundation but moved decisively in a new direction based on our investigation toward several literary works entitled: ethical focus was grounded in everyday realism and “micro-activism”; diversity shifted from a mere topic to an infrastructure of production and circulation (own-voices authors, inclusion-oriented imprints/editors, networks of festivals and book clubs); and hybrid forms graduated from experiments at the margins to baseline twenty-first-century literacy.

The sharpest difference appears in the story’s function as a moral testing ground. In the 2000s, ethical dilemmas were explored in alternative worlds, such as wizarding schools, traction cities, or totalitarian regimes, allowing readers to weigh power and responsibility within clear frames. In the 2010s, this exercise expanded into real-world spaces, including classrooms, families, neighborhoods, and social media. Dystopia persisted, but social realism—encompassing issues such as racial justice, bullying, poverty, mental health, and the climate crisis—came to the fore. In short, the arc shifts from “thinking right” in simulated worlds (2000s) to “acting right” in everyday contexts (2010s), encompassing actions such as speaking up, networking, organizing, and caring for the community.

At the level of representation, the 2000s marked a door-opening phase: more non-dominant characters and settings appeared, but they were often positioned as mere introductions. In the 2010s, that door became a functioning ecosystem: own-voices authors moved to the forefront, publishers established dedicated imprints, cross-regional translation increased, and intersectional approaches (encompassing race, class, gender, religion, and disability) became a practice rather than

a jargon. This shift also changed classroom reading from learning about other people's cultures to reading one's own position, bias, and privilege, linking these to local issues and concrete action.

In terms of form, the 2000s demonstrated that graphic novels, heavily illustrated novels, interactive picture books, and wordless narratives can serve as practical tools to help readers engage with complex themes more easily. In the 2010s, these forms gained mainstream acceptance and institutional recognition, entering syllabi, appearing in assessments, and earning major awards. Beyond graphics, verse novels and other multimodal works leveraged rhythm, white space, and visual collage to scaffold emotion and access. The practical impact was clear: close reading of panels, re-storyboarding scenes, visual essays, and reflective podcast/comic assignments became standard ways to assess comprehension, empathy, and metacognition simultaneously.

Pedagogically, the 2000s were well-suited to building moral reasoning through safe scenarios filtered by genre. Teachers sparked discussions about the balance between rules and justice, courage and compliance, and the consequences of actions. In the 2010s, texts invited action-oriented tasks such as small community service projects, digital literacy campaigns, or environmental observations. The two complement each other: the first is the ethical framework honed in the 2000s, which provides language and concepts, while the 2010s offer practice and reflection close to students' lives. It is a well-synchronized ecosystem with potential for the use of literary works, with implications for the world of education. The availability of moral laboratories through predecessor literary works in the 2000s, and the emergence of actions embedded in scholarly works in the following period, will encourage society and readers to take more action to realize their ideas.

The industry ecosystem also changed. In the 2000s, the canon was strongly shaped by mega-series and global cultural moments. In the 2010s, meaning distribution dispersed across school book clubs, library networks, digital platforms, and reader communities. This strengthening brought opportunities and challenges, like marginalized voices being promoted more effectively, but debates over curation and censorship intensified. Teachers had to navigate curriculum, school policy, and parental sensitivities in classrooms while keeping critical literacy goals in mind.

There is both continuity and productive tension. Each decade sought to cultivate empathy and ethical reasoning, but with different risks. The 2000s can drift into too escapist if not bridged to real-world contexts, and the 2010s can become too message-centric if the story yields to an agenda. Balancing strategies differ accordingly: the 2000s benefit from bridging texts (articles/archives) and fantasy-history comparisons, whereas the 2010s require aesthetic space—allowing ambiguity, humor, and narrative beauty to flourish—so that texts do not become pamphlets.

Between 2001 and 2009, a single line was drawn, laying the groundwork for ethical thinking, empathy, and multimodal reading. The 2010–2019 period put that language to work—in classrooms, communities, and the digital sphere—emphasizing consistent small actions and structured inclusion. For research and teaching, it is clear that by combining the strengths of both decades, utilizing the 2000s' simulation framework to sharpen concepts, and then embedding the 2010s' participatory practices, students will not only understand but also be able and willing to act.

3.2.2 2020 – 2025's Children's Literature

Broadly speaking, 2001–2009 functioned as a foundation decade: the post–Harry Potter boom in serial fantasy ran alongside the rise of multicultural voices and the emergence of hybrid forms (graphic/illustrated novels, verse novels), with the launch of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (ALMA) strengthening the global ecosystem. The late 2000s marked a transitional moment: fantasy remained dominant, but diversity and new formats began to gain recognition through major prizes and the international market. Contemporary documents from the period frame it as the “Golden Age of fantasy” and chart early diversification, noting the first surge of graphic and hybrid novels heading into the 2010s.

As discussed previously, from 2000 to 2009, the foundation underwent a significant transformation, effectively taking over and effecting a structural change in which diversity moved beyond discourse to the winners' lists (e.g., awards to writers/illustrators of color and verse novels winning the Carnegie). Non-prose formats (graphic novels, verse novels, and picture books) received validation from established prizes. By the decade's close, it was a significant shift; stories from diverse backgrounds, such as immigration, race, and gender, had become the new face of the canon, and multimodal formats were recognized on par with traditional prose. In short, the 2010s balanced fantasy and realism, elevated own-voices authors, and normalized multimodal forms within the mainstream.

The 2020–2025 period exhibits two distinct shifts that distinguish it from the previous two decades. First, a turn to the real world becomes mainstream in the wake of the pandemic, racial-justice movements, war, and mental-health concerns. The children's literacy ecosystem responded quickly—from virtual read-alouds and free content during

school/library closures to the emergence of sub-categories on pandemic themes and SEL—making the book's function as a tool for making sense of crisis highly visible. These are no longer “add-on” topics but front-line narratives that help children name fear, loss, and recovery. Second, the normalization of diversity and internationalization becomes a concrete reality. It is not only in characters/themes but also in language and supporting institutions (e.g., ALMA 2024 for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation and Carnegie winners via translation). This signals that cross-lingual/cross-cultural access is becoming a new norm in the ecosystem, while raising questions about the right to read amid rising book bans.

From an ethical standpoint, the 2001–2009 period was marked by training in critical thinking through the simulational space of fantasy/dystopia. 2010–2019 children's literary works balanced simulation with social realism and supplied the language/frames for positional reading. Now, from 2020 to 2025, it shifts toward acting right in everyday life (community projects, digital literacy, self-care, and community care) because global crises directly impact readers' lives. This functional shift is easy to trace from 2020: children's books openly address COVID-19 and BLM, and author–illustrator communities put stories online to keep children connected during quarantine.

Finally, the global network in 2020–2025 feels more “real” than in the previous decade: not only has cross-translation increased, but the flow of translation rights is lively at international children's book fairs, and there is greater attention to institutions/festivals that support literacy. This continues the highly global trend of the 2010s and grounds the 2000s promise of mutually reading markets, now with minority languages and community work also celebrated by international awards. In short: 2001–2009 laid the foundation (potent fantasy, rising diversity, the birth of hybrid formats); 2010–2019 consolidated the changes (inclusion and multimodality ratified through prizes and curricula); 2020–2025 turned them into new habits while responding directly to global crises (normalizing diversity across languages/genres, expanding media to audio/AR, and emphasizing recovery, action, and the freedom to read). These three phases complement one another: moral language and imagination (the 2000s), institutional frameworks and formats (the 2010s), and everyday practice and technology (the early 2020s). That is why children's literature now feels more grounded, more layered, and more flexible in its storytelling, yet still faithful to its core aim: cultivating empathy, reasoning, and hope for young readers.

The results should summarize (scientific) findings of the study. It should be written in clear and concise language. The separation or combination of Results and Discussion is accepted. If the result is separated into some subheadings, the subheading should be numbered as follows:

4. Conclusion

This study affirms that the two research questions—(1) how the form and ethical function of narratives in global children's literature shift from 2001–2009, 2010–2019, to 2020–2025; and (2) how transformations in the publishing ecosystem, identity representation, and narrative media (from fantasy to realism, from print to multimodal–digital) reflect changing values and pedagogical orientations—are answered by consistent cross-decade findings: from a fantasy/dystopia-based “moral laboratory” (early 2000s), to social realism and everyday participation (2010s), and then to recovery, empathy, digital literacy, and planetary justice in 2020–2025. This shift is accompanied by the normalization of own-voices and intersectionality, as well as the institutional validation of hybrid forms (graphic/verse novels, multimodal picturebooks) that have entered the mainstream. Accordingly, children's literature shifts from merely representing diversity to mainstreaming inclusion across industry practice and from linear texts to cross-media experiences that cultivate empathy, civic reasoning, and ecological care. Even so, the study has limitations: first, a curation strategy centered on prize-winning and globally circulated works risks selection bias (underrepresenting influential local titles lacking institutional recognition); second, linguistic and regional bias (reliance on English-language works/translations) may blur regional nuances and non-Anglophone publishing practices; third, a qualitative–comparative design with reflexive thematic analysis is interpretive, so findings hinge on coding and reading decisions; fourth, temporal bounds (through 2025) in a rapidly changing landscape; and fifth, the absence of reader reception, classroom practice, or measurable learning outcomes (e.g., SEL indicators, climate literacy, attitudinal change). In the future, research should broaden the corpus to non-award and grassroots titles from the Global South and local languages, combine close reading with computational analytics (topic modeling, bibliometrics, translation-flow mapping) to trace cross-border circulation of ideas while testing new media—audio, podcasts, AR/VR—and platform-algorithm effects on discovery; incorporate reception studies with readers, teachers, and parents (surveys, classroom ethnography, instructional design trials); examine “right-to-read” policies and censorship; and develop durable yet straightforward indicators of ethical–ecological learning outcomes.

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