

## The Concept of Childhood

Assumptions about childhood have the potential to become self-fulfilling prophecies, making children what adults believe they already are. If adults believe that children have short attention spans, they won't expose them to long books. If adults believe that children cannot understand complicated language, they will give them only books with limited vocabularies. If adults believe children are susceptible, they will keep children away from interesting books that may contain potentially dangerous ideas or attitudes. And if adults believe children like only certain kinds of books, they will not give children access to any other kinds. Deprived of the experience of anything more than the little adults believe them capable of, children often learn to be inflexible, intolerant of the complex and the unconventional. (p. 94, Nodelman & Reimer).

Discuss:

1. What is *childhood*? Across which years of a person's life does this stage span? What does it mean to be a child?
2. What, in your opinion, are the best works of children's literature that you can think of? What are the most popular—or even bestselling? Do you see a chasm between what is good and what is popular?
3. How do developmental assumptions about children affect children's literature and reading?
4. How might this ideology of childhood negatively affect children?
5. To what degree do you believe it's important to allow children access, through literature, to many kinds of experiences and ideas, however unpleasant? Should children's reading or the contents of children's books be censored in any way?

Activity:

1. Peruse the collection of folktales and fairytales provided in the classroom.
2. What characteristics to the classic fairytales, that you are familiar with, have in common. Make a list with group (or partner).
3. How are the non-western folktales distinguished from the Western or European ones? Be specific and record your answers.
4. Do any of these stories differ dramatically from the versions with which you are familiar?
5. Which ones do you think are written for a “childhood” audience? Why?