

This Week's Citation Classic®

Opie I & Opie P. *The lore and language of schoolchildren.*
Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1959. 417 p.
[West Liss, Hampshire, England]

Based on information collected from 5,000 schoolchildren in England, Scotland, and Wales in the 1950s, this volume is a comprehensive record of the lore and language natural to mid-twentieth century schoolchildren when out of school. It demonstrates the wealth and variety of their jokes, riddles, insults, repartee, superstitions, strange beliefs, calendar customs, oral legislation, tricks and pranks, and shows that much of the lore has survived for centuries. [The *A&HCI*®, the *SSCI*®, and the *SCI*® indicate that this book has been cited in more than 195 publications.]

The "Secret" Lore of Childhood

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"Secret lore" and "secret tribe" were the phrases most used by the media when *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* came out in 1959. There was, in fact, no secrecy involved. Adults forget most of the banter, rhymes, games, and child-legislation that once ornamented and controlled their lives in the playground, and recall it only imperfectly in their old age.

Our innovation was to go directly to the people concerned—the children, that is—and ask them what they were doing, saying singing, and believing, in their own community, in their own free time, now. Fifty or a hundred years before, they might indeed have been secretive, in awe of adults and not sure how such information might be received. But, in the 1950s they were entirely forthcoming (and might have been forthcoming even about erotic material, but in the climate of the 1950s it was impossible to ask them about that).

During the seven years we were working on *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, we acquired some material that clearly belonged to schoolchildren rather than to children of nursery age.¹ This formed the basis for the next book.

A letter to the *Sunday Times* in 1951 brought us into touch with a large num-

ber of volunteer teachers who helped us build up a network of contacts throughout Great Britain. We sent them questionnaires which explained what we were trying to do and suggested some lines of enquiry—"A ball game we often play," for instance, or "The silliest game I know," or, more specifically, "A word to say, and an action to go with it, if you want to stop playing for a moment in a chasing game." No one was ever asked to fill in a form. We made the survey as informal as possible, keeping in personal contact with the teachers and sometimes corresponding with individual children. The idea was for a whole school to write descriptions of games, which would not be marked as if they were school essays. We needed a mass of information so that we could get an idea of the range of the lore, see what was common and what was rare, and provide data for the 10 distribution maps. In later surveys, I supplemented the written papers by recording in playgrounds.

We did not imagine that the book would have the same impact as the *Dictionary*, and we were astonished when every newspaper and journal gave it large, excited reviews. On publication day, coming home after interviews, we bought an *Evening Standard*, and there—under a banner headline "Children—they're all little savages!"—was a half-page review by Penelope Mortimer. It seems that the intellectual part of the population had forgotten how horrible children really are—or had been to private schools where the traditions are not so strong.

The reasons that this book has become a *Classic*, and has been consulted and quoted so often, seem clear. No other book covers the whole gamut of schoolchild lore and language for the whole of the country. It is authoritative, being based securely on a large amount of original research; but, it is not full of forbidding statistics and heavy-handed adult pronouncements. Above all, it is highly readable and does not overpower its lightweight subject. (I can say this since Peter, not I, did the actual writing.)

1. Opie I & Opie P. *The Oxford dictionary of nursery rhymes.* Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1951.
Received April 13, 1992