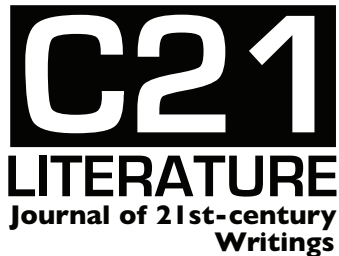




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Review

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REVIEW

Book Review: Paul V. Allen. *Eleanor Cameron: Dimensions of Amazement*

Jackson, MS, USA: University Press of Mississippi. hbk: Feb. 2018, ISBN 9781496814487, 266 pages, 24 b&w illustrations, £65.50. pbk: Apr. 2019, ISBN 9781496823274, 266 pages, 24 b&w illustrations, £25.50

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Allen's book, *Eleanor Cameron: Dimensions of Amazement* draws on the hundreds of letters Cameron wrote, the notes she kept, and copies of her manuscripts, both of her published and unpublished work that make up her legacy. The result is not only an engaging scholarly study of one of America's foremost female authors of children's literature of her era, but is also an accessible read for non-academics interested in learning about the life and output of this author. Furthermore, Cameron was one of the first to write critically on the subject of literature for children.

Following a Foreword by the American children's author, Gregory Maguire, in which he remarks on the timelessness of Cameron's books, and an Introduction by Allen himself, the text is divided into fourteen chapters, each focusing on particular themes and preoccupations, personal and literary, that made up Eleanor Cameron's life journey. Allen notes that Cameron was an only child born to English parents who had emigrated to Canada. The family struggled to find a financial foothold and suitable work, moving across the border, first to Minnesota, then Ohio and finally to Berkeley in California. Cameron's father was a difficult man, unable to show affection, and the strain on her mother was significant. It was only after her parents divorced in 1922 that Eleanor's life improved and she formed a close lasting

relationship with her mother. It was a kinship that was to repeat itself in the lifelong closeness she enjoyed with her son, David, who was born in 1944. Eleanor had married his father, Ian, a printmaker and publisher, ten years earlier and moved with him to Los Angeles.

Framed by the backdrop of her personal story as context, the book is ultimately a study of Cameron's career as a writer, literary critic and, in later years, as public speaker at schools, universities and conferences. Allen relates the writing process of each of Cameron's books, giving a summary of their contents and describing the conversations, written and face to face, that she engaged in with her editors and publishers. Cameron, always very self-critical and forthright, wanted her books to be the best they could be and was determined to have a say in how they should look. One significant instance came at the beginning of her writing career. Unhappy about the photographs that had been taken for the back cover of her first novel, *Unheard Music* (1950), Cameron wrote to her editor at Little Brown, Dudley Cloud, asking him to 'please destroy this book-jacket plate'. New pictures were taken, but in order to recoup the cost the novel did not run to a second edition (117). Cameron frequently sought out the illustrators for her books herself and occasionally fell out with the staff at Little Brown when they told her a certain artist was outside their budget (118). Cameron took good and bad reviews to heart and felt the pressures of marketing and how her books were received by the reading public (45).

Allen details, in great depth, the revisions Cameron made to her manuscripts, which alterations recommended by her editors she made readily and which were instigated reluctantly or even ignored. A particularly distressing episode of this nature involved the publication of Cameron's first volume of critical essays, *The Green and Burning Tree* (1969). Emilie McLeod, who had taken over from Cloud as editor at Little Brown in 1950 wanted to omit two of the essays from the collection, 'Dimensions of Amazement' and 'A Sense of Audience', while Cameron was adamant that they should be included. Cameron further disagreed with the publisher about the cover, the endpapers that were suggested, the binding and even the type of paper to be used. She felt the publisher was trying to save money and so the

period between August 1968 and March 1969 saw a lively exchange of correspondence between Cameron and Emilie McLeod. McLeod is said to have told Cameron: 'My job is not to please you. My job is to sell your book' (118–119).

Cameron's friends were important to her and Allen talks about the friendships and acquaintances Cameron formed with other writers. Her best friend was Ruth Lipkis with whom she regularly corresponded. The letters, together with Cameron's notes and copies of her manuscripts, are now in the Kerlan Collection, one of the world's largest archives of children's literature, held at the University of Minnesota. Other friends included the fantasy writer, Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018), the children's author, Lloyd Alexander (1924–2007), and the writer and publisher, Doris Gates (1901–1987).

Allen tells us that 'Eleanor put all of herself into her fiction' (xvi), so it comes as no surprise that Cameron readily plucked events from her own childhood with which to personalise her fiction. *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet* (1954) features her own son and his best friend as recognisable characters. In her five 'Julia' books, written between 1971 and 1988, the protagonist is a young girl who wants to be writer and is largely based on Cameron herself. In the first book, *A Room Made of Windows* (1971), Cameron describes Julia's struggle to accept her mother's engagement to the man Julia was to call Uncle Phil. This is a direct reference to her own situation when Cameron's mother remarried in 1924. Her stepfather, William Earle Warren, was a much kinder man than her father had been, but it took Eleanor a long time to appreciate it and acknowledge that her mother deserved to be happy and 'was not created solely for her own convenience and pleasure' (11). From the 1960s onwards Eleanor Cameron began to engage in literary criticism. Her essays were published in *The Horn Book*, a bi-monthly magazine dedicated to reviewing children's literature founded in Boston in 1924. They were collected in two volumes. The first entitled, *The Green and Burning Tree* was published in 1969; the second appeared in 1993 as *The Seed and the Vision*.

Cameron's most high-profile criticism occurred in 1973, when she wrote a blistering critique of Roald Dahl's children's novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*,

published nine years earlier. Like the English children's author and scholar, John Rowe Townsend (1922–2014), Cameron was critical of Dahl's depiction of the Oompa-Loompas as African black pygmies. She felt it was in poor taste and indicated a decline in the quality of children's literature. She further condemned the notion that sweets are nourishment, saying that the book, like the 'brief sensory pleasure' of candy, left the reader with little satisfaction (110). Cameron's critique was published in *The Horn Book* and Dahl responded in the same magazine, accusing her of 'enormous conceit' (111). In the next edition of his novel Dahl's Oompa-Loompas featured 'rosy-white' skin and 'golden hair' and were said to hail from Loompaland (112). Although Cameron is often credited with instigating these revisions, Allen believes that Dahl's publishers had already planned them before the debate about the Oompa-Loompas erupted. Allen says Dahl was a morally complex figure who, although being a philanthropist and devoted father, had a dark side. He was an unapologetic anti-Semite and, in 1989, supported the fatwa against the writer, Salman Rushdie. He saw nothing morally wrong in the Oompa-Loompas being black slaves and denied there was anything racist in the original version of his characters (115).

Besides the six 'Planet Mushroom' books and five 'Julia' novels, Eleanor Cameron authored seven other children's books in the period between 1959 and 1980. Her output also includes around thirty (uncollected) published articles, essays and book reviews. Despite her early determination to be a writer she suffered numerous rejections. In the end her persistence paid off. Late in life she was to write to a friend, 'If one is a writer, then no amount of rejection is going to discourage or dam up the obsession' (21). Without her contribution American children's literature in the second half of the twentieth century would have been a very different scene. Her astute assessment and criticism, both written and verbal, ensured lively and vital debate among publishers and academics.

The only reservation in regard to *Eleanor Cameron: Dimensions of Amazement* is the book's reference to source material. There are no footnotes or endnotes within the body of the text itself. At the end of the book there is a brief section headed

'Notes', listing quotes under separate chapter headings, but without sufficient citations to allow them to be followed up. This caveat notwithstanding, Paul V. Allen's biography of Cameron's life and work is a valuable addition to the existing scholarship on the subject of children's literature.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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