

Humane Ideology

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Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction, by John Stephens. London and New York: Longman, 1992.

Ideology is what those who disagree with us believe; what we believe ourselves is the way things are. So it is claimed by those who object to what they derisively call politically correct approaches to literature—the wide variety of feminist, Marxist, and New Historicist analyses of the ideological content of literary texts. These objectors are convinced that reality as they view it themselves—in almost every case, as it has been traditionally understood and described by white upper-class and middle-class males of European extraction and their female companions—is all the reality there is. Worthwhile literary texts, particularly those in the canon of great literature, do nothing more than reflect the essence of that one true and truly universal reality. These texts are, therefore, above the transience and silliness of ideology—they are not political at all. And any texts that do have ideology in them are just ephemeral trash—propaganda for bad ideas.

But as John Stephens points out in this important and persuasive book: "Ideologies . . . are not necessarily undesirable, and in the sense of a system of beliefs by which we make sense of the world, social life would be impossible without them" (8). No living human being is or ever was separate from the ideology of a specific time and place and culture, and that includes Shakespeare and Milton—and Beatrix Potter and Lloyd Alexander: "a narrative without an ideology is unthinkable" (8).

Indeed, Stephens insists that "if you read a book and discover that it is utterly free of ideological presuppositions, what that really means is that you have just read a book which precisely reflects those societal presuppositions which you yourself have learned to subscribe to, and which are therefore invisible" (50). Stephens's major purpose in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* is to render that invisibility visible, to reveal the extent to which the chil-

dren's books of our time confirm and sustain specific societal and cultural presuppositions.

His enterprise is timely; despite the impressive progress that critics of adult literature have made in recent years in uncovering and understanding the ideological implications of literary texts, far too many commentators on children's literature prefer to remain blind to its societal and cultural presuppositions. Most reviews in such popular organs as the *Horn Book* and even a surprising proportion of the articles in professional journals devoted to children's literature (including this one) work from the unstated assumption that children's literature—or, at any rate, worthwhile children's literature—exists outside ideology. Stephens offers a powerful corrective to the unconsidered, somewhat egocentric, and far too common habit of believing that the children's books that most accurately reflect an adult commentator's own unacknowledged vision of reality are the good ones.

I expected a book with the word *ideology* in its title to concentrate on issues of gender, race, and class. But Stephens has surprisingly little to say about any of them; instead, he focuses on the assumptions that underlie those matters—on the essential vision of reality that so many children's books and so many commentators on children's literature (including, I have to admit, myself) take for granted.

As scholars, educators, and librarians, as believers in the power of ideas to change lives, we tend to assume the liberal humanist view that reality is a place in which individuals have the power to define and control their lives. We love children's books in which characters must make choices that define their existence and its meaning. We particularly admire those in which the choices have to do with the rejection of socially conformist values or pressures and the assertion of individual self-governance, especially in the face of political repression or bleak economic conditions. When poor black or oppressed Jewish characters find the courage within themselves to believe in their individual integrity despite massive attempts to undermine and destroy it, we cheer like crazy and throw handfuls of Newberys and Carnegies and Governor-General Awards at the books describing them.

But liberal humanists remain blithely unconscious of the contradiction at the heart of these assumptions, and even previous discussions of ideology in relation to children's fiction have failed to

address it. These commentators all assume that individuals are, on the one hand, deeply implicated in and affected by their social circumstances (and thus by ideology) but, on the other hand, somehow essentially separate from and therefore in some important way untouched by that which has formed them. For instance, most objections to the racism or sexism of certain children's books operate on the self-contradicting assumption that child readers have not yet absorbed the values of their families, their class, and their culture and are therefore absolutely free to choose to accept these pernicious ideas from books. Although the books are ideological and dangerous, the children are, thus far at least, separate enough from ideology to be at risk from it, or so we suppose. Peter Hunt's *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (1991) offers a more sophisticated analysis of ideology and espouses a more optimistic view of children, but it expresses exactly the same contradiction: even though children's books have ideological content, children are inherently independent, free spirits whose imaginative spontaneity allows them to triumphantly escape the intended ideological indoctrination.

Stephens himself is more toughminded; he understands that child readers are already implicated in ideology, not separate from it at all. And because he understands that, he is able to perceive and to analyze the repressive impulse of exactly those texts which we most admire and which seem most to encourage children's sense of their own individuality. He does so by focusing on a paradox: texts that strongly encourage child readers to value individual will and choice over social conformity are in fact demanding not only agreement with their adult writers' values but also conformity to the mainstream values of our culture, particularly mainstream definitions of what it means to be an individual. Most important, he shows that the ways texts by authors as diverse as Judy Blume and Ursula Le Guin encourage agreement are themselves manipulative and therefore strangely repressive of readers' individual freedom. Texts like *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* and *The Tombs of Atuan* appear to affirm individuality but actually work to deprive readers of their freedom to think differently or to be truly individual, because they offer readers only a narrow range of ways to be individual—ways that discourage readers from any action or thought that might threaten the peaceful maintenance of the social whole as currently constituted.

Stephens believes that such texts forcefully manipulate readers into espousing socially acceptable ideas about who and what they individually are by offering specific positions or points of view from which fictional events are perceived and understood and then encouraging readers to occupy those positions themselves; as he says, "readers . . . , in taking up a position from which the text is most readily intelligible, are apt to be situated within the frame of the text's ideology; that is, they are subjected to and by that ideology" (67). The key word here is "subjected"; in developing subjectivity (what less ideologically conscious writers call selfhood or individuality and see as separate from ideology), we become subjected to ideological pressure; to become subjective is to be subjected.

Stephens is thus highly suspicious of a strategy for making sense of literary texts that commentators almost universally encourage: young readers' identification with fictional characters. Coupled with reader-focused approaches to texts that purport to value the individuality inherent in a young reader's supposedly individual response, this "is a dangerous ideological tool and pedagogically irresponsible. It fosters an illusion that readers are in control of the text whereas they are highly susceptible to the ideologies of the text, especially the unarticulated or implicit ideologies" (68). Stephens himself encourages, first, the development of reading strategies that allow a wider spectrum of possibilities—not just identification but also various means of gaining critical distance from characters—and, second, the reading of texts that offer readers a choice of subject positions.

Finally, however, he announces his agreement with one specific form of subjectivity, "an ideological perspective deeply embedded in Western social practice: the self is an amalgam of all its experiences and of every other with which it has had significant contact, but essential selfhood is a negotiated separateness" (286). Although this definition sounds much like the contradiction that I outlined earlier—the idea of a self affected by exterior pressures but somehow still essentially separate from them—there is a key difference: the word *negotiated*. According to Stephens, we develop knowledge of the individuality of our own subjectivity by knowing enough about the subjectivities of others to be able to consider how they are unlike our own; we do not so much identify with what we resemble as *not* identify with what we do not resemble. We become conscious of who we are by constantly negotiating between what we have be-

come through earlier negotiations with texts and the social world and what texts and the world around us are constantly encouraging us to believe we are.

Speaking of this sort of negotiated separateness, Stephens says, "I think myself it is the best and most humane subject position available to us as human beings" (287). But even here Stephens is refreshingly conscious of the pressures of ideology: "I also recognize that in reaching it readers are thoroughly subjected to the text's processes" (287). True, but what impresses me about Stephens's approach is the degree of trust that it implies in the ability of children to move through uncertainties, arrive at their own conclusions, and take a key part in the construction of their selves. Faith in the good sense of children is rare and commendable, especially when it never denies the extent to which cultural pressures control our perceptions of others and ourselves.

So far I have discussed ideology and said nothing directly about the other key word in Stephens's title: *language*. But I have been talking about language all along, for, as Stephens points out, all language is ideological, "since language does not merely reflect the world but is crucial to the very constitution of the world" (12). An earlier attempt to place children's fiction in the context of ideologically oriented theory, Jacqueline Rose's *Case of Peter Pan; or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, took that thesis for granted. Rose's argument seemed like gassy theorizing because she discussed no text other than the one she acknowledged to be freakishly unique, Barrie's *Peter Pan*. One of the great strengths of Stephens's book is that he not only asserts that language is ideological but shows how. He provides detailed, ingenious, and persuasive analyses of the ideological implications in texts as diverse as Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, Babette Coles's *Prince Cinders*, and Le Guin's *Tombs of Atuan*. Informed by a rich understanding both of the general characteristics of language as described by linguists and of the specific narrative uses of language as described by narratological theorists, these analyses offer intellectual pleasure as well as understanding.

Not only is *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* a strong and persuasive critique of common and dangerous assumptions about childhood subjectivity and children's literature, but Stephens manages the critique without even suggesting what doctrinaire theorists like Rose insist on: that children's literature as a whole is a mistaken

enterprise, nothing more than a nastily repressive effort to manipulate children by totalitarian adults. Instead, Stephens expresses his own deep pleasure in some of the typical forms of children's fiction and defends it as good for children, even though he never forgets important ideological concerns. Even more important, his acceptance of the inevitability of our adult responsibility to help children construct their subjectivities leads him to suggest ways of exercising that responsibility that never deny its inherent repressiveness and therefore always express a humane respect for young, malleable human beings.