



The Hidden Child in *The Hidden Adult*

—Perry Nodelman

Some readers of my book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* have objected to what they rightly perceive as its lack of concern for the part children play in creating and transforming the texts they read. According to Marah Gubar, for instance, approaches like mine suggest that “adults have power, voice, and agency and children do not” (“Risky” 452). Since I consciously chose when writing *The Hidden Adult* not to focus on the agency of young readers, I need to explain why.

The question of whether or not children have something called “agency” is central to the scholarship of childhood: as Florian Esser and his colleagues note, “The significance of agency as a key concept for Childhood Studies goes back to the original aspiration of this area of research: to appreciate children’s active contribution to the shaping of their social worlds and to society” (“Reconceptualising” 1). That said, the praiseworthy urge to appreciate something one approves of might well lead one to misinterpret what

one identifies as worthy of being appreciated. For David Oswell, “children’s agency (children as ‘active,’ ‘participative’ and politically demonstrative) is less something that can be or needs to be asserted, and more something to be explored” (25). Exploring it reveals the deficiencies of two extreme views of it. On the one hand, there is the idea that people—especially, it seems, children—have a natural, inborn freedom to be and to act for themselves that allows them to defy what social institutions invite them to do and to be. In this view, widespread in discourse about childhood for the last few centuries, children are inherently subversive of social structures, and the agency of children can be appreciated because it is there to be appreciated. On the other hand, there is the conviction that social structures play such a significant role in shaping people that the ability to bypass them is illusory. In other words, no actual agency is possible. Less extreme views suggest that, on the one hand, it is social structures themselves that offer various forms of

agency for those participating in them, and on the other, therefore, that agency is not merely a matter of rejecting social structures. As Esser notes in his own contribution to his co-edited volume, “The child is embedded in a whole network of different objects, people and practices, within which agency is produced,” adding that “agency is not a human capacity opposed to society but is socially produced” (53). Furthermore, a significant factor in the social network of children is their childhood—the extent to which the social roles available to young people are influenced by ideas about their innocence or inexperience, their liberating freedom from restraint that offers them agency or their vulnerability and need for older people to protect them that limits their agency.

As part of the social network of childhood, the industry that produces and consumes texts of children’s literature appears to offer young people a range of ways of thinking about who they are, some of which appear to offer more agency than others. Furthermore, other components of that network—adult assumptions about childhood and reading, social class and gender, personal circumstances—influence the kind of agency that young readers might achieve in response to the texts they encounter. Clearly, then, scholarly explorations of the ways in which texts engage the agency of their young readers are well worth pursuing. But, in the light of all these complicating factors, a persuasively nuanced understanding of how it

happens is difficult to achieve. Furthermore, since it involves social structures as well as literary texts, such an understanding requires knowledge of a range of disciplines beyond literary studies—knowledge of which I personally have less than an expert understanding. It was for that reason that I chose to focus on the textual aspects of literature for young people in *The Hidden Adult*, on what sorts of responses the texts seem to be inviting rather than on the vast sea of different things that actually do happen to the wide variety of people who read them.

The adults who write, publish, and purchase books for young people do so because they perceive young people as needing a special literature they cannot produce themselves; accordingly, the texts these adults produce represent adult voices speaking to and for young people. As a result, these texts operate often in ways that work to deprive children of their individual voices in the name of an acceptable childlikeness. I explore some of these ways in *The Hidden Adult*. Gubar is correct to say that “the mere act of describing young people as voiceless can itself help render them voiceless” (“Risky” 452). But, if I do not describe their voices in *The Hidden Adult*, I believe it is not me who is rendering them voiceless but the texts themselves. My attempts to engage with that aspect of these texts is no more an act of disempowering children than pointing out the sexism of disempowering portrayals of women is an act of disempowering women. Rather



... our appreciation
of childhood
independence might
mislead us into
finding it when it is
not in fact there.



than rendering children voiceless, I see my project in *The Hidden Adult* as supporting its adult readers in the work of encouraging children to use their voices. In *The Hidden Adult*, I mean it when I say, “I believe I have a moral responsibility to proceed with the conviction that such a project is pointless without a long-range goal of actually affecting how real people read and think about what they read—including, eventually, children. . . . I believe that children too can share those modes of reading and understanding, and might also be better off for it” (87, 90). In other words, if I have the agency to read texts for young people critically, then might not young readers have this agency also?

Does that imply that children lack the ability to take a critical stance on the powerful forces working to shape them until adults like me teach it to them? Perhaps—but only, I believe, because human beings generally share that plight, because many of us of all ages tend to accept the version of reality that powerful forces present to us until others help us to become aware of the possibility of thinking about it critically. As childhood studies scholars Priscilla Alderson and Tamaki Yoshida say, “Children’s knowledge, judgement, foresight, freedom of choice, control and agency are all very limited, but so too are adults’ capacities. At all ages, human agency is constantly constrained by structures and by other agents, by resources and chance” (77).

Even when readers might appear to be exercising an independent form of agency in their unusual or creative engagements with texts, they may be less empowered than they seem; our appreciation of childhood independence might mislead us into finding it when it is not in fact there. Readers of all ages, including very young ones, are already in the process of being shaped by the values of their environment. What looks like an independent response might actually be a replication of previously accepted cultural patterns—an acceptance of a form of agency

that confirms cultural norms. Consider, for instance, Gubar's belief "that young people had more to do with the development of children's theatre than we think" ("*Peter*" 477) and that James Barrie's lost boys helped to shape the contents of his Peter Pan stories in games he played with them. Perhaps they did. But those games, very much under Barrie's guidance, were also shaped by the adult authors of the many texts for young people he and the boys drew on, some of the values of which they inevitably replicated even while reshaping them. They had some agency, true, but what they did was very much in the context of acceptable ideas about what children can and should do—especially, perhaps, the still culturally powerful idea of children as innocent, imaginative, and playful. Are all children equally imaginative and playful? In my experience as a parent and more recently as a guide for art gallery school tours, no. Are children more likely to be imaginative and playful if encouraged by an imaginative and playful adult? In my experience, yes.

But, then, I have to acknowledge that those experiences were merely mine and merely relate to some specific children in a specific place and time. We cannot safely generalize based on the different experiences of specific children. As I suggest in "*On the Border between Implication and Actuality*," my survey of scholarship describing specific interactions between children and picture books, we can usefully draw attention to specific children's reading

experiences when they reveal the inaccuracies of often-limiting, widespread assumptions about what child readers are capable of understanding. But we cannot assume that what happened to one child or to one group of children will happen to any others, and we cannot declare that child readers generally act independently based on one or two children's expressions of independent minds. As Sharan B. Merriam says of the qualitative research in the social sciences that studies the reading experiences of specific children, "A small sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (28).

As I say in "*On the Border*," I admire attempts to arrive at such particular understandings and happily acknowledge their value, especially in terms of how they challenge simplistic, generalized assumptions about children and how they read. But I have to admit to an urge to understand what might be more widely true about children's literature than what might be true about the responses of particular readers to specific texts. I also believe that it is possible at least to begin to come to that wider understanding, that one can move in directions that allow for at least some generalizing about qualities that are found often in enough characteristic texts to be considered conventions of children's literature, and that doing so can result in useful and, I believe, potentially liberatory

knowledge—knowledge that might help children to find and to use their own voices.

I hasten to add that by children's literature I do not mean anything and everything that children read or respond to. As I make clear in *The Hidden Adult*, my focus has always been specifically on the texts written by adults, published as children's or young adult literature in the years since there has been a children's publishing industry, and primarily, in the light of the limitations of my own skills and experience, written in English. This specific body of texts, produced as a commercial endeavour by businesses in search of profits, most clearly represents what drives my work as a critic of children's literature: how North American and British adults work to shape children in ways that make them happy consumers by means of the texts produced for them. In a sense, that narrow focus functions as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy; I dismiss texts produced otherwise that do not seem to fit, for I do not see their existence as a challenge to my perceptions of what is conventional. What is conventional has power, and its power needs to be acknowledged and explored. I believe that we can think usefully about how young readers do or might engage with these texts only after we understand more about the texts themselves.

Is it possible to develop such an understanding? I believe it is, and I try to act on my belief in my critical writing. But, you might well say, if it is true that we

cannot generalize about how children read from examples involving specific children, then why should I assume a general application for the conclusions about texts I read myself? Why should anybody else pay attention to how *I* read?

My answer is that, like all literary critics, I believe that my reading practices and the readings that result from them have the potential to offer helpful knowledge to others, that they are usefully shareable. Not all responses are so useful. Someone might say, for instance, that reading *Charlotte's Web* makes her think of avocados—perhaps because she first ate guacamole while reading it. But since *Charlotte's Web* makes no mention of avocados, such a response makes no usefully shareable point about the novel other than that texts receive a wide range of responses. If that is all we can say, then what is the point of ever saying anything?

To be usefully shareable, I think, a reading must show other readers something about a text as one reads it oneself that affects how others might understand it in what one believes to be a helpful way. In other words, the reading should try to move others past their own immediate responses so far toward something about the text the critic believes to be worth knowing, something that emerged from but, the critic believes, goes beyond a personal interaction with a text. Most significantly, I think, a critical reading should focus on how a text might be inviting and encouraging a specific response it intends readers to share.

But, says David Rudd in his critique of *The Hidden Adult*, “I do not believe we can ever know a text’s intentions, and even if we could, it would be hard delimiting the text to such an ‘intended’ reading” (90). We obviously cannot limit the potential of texts to such meanings, and we can never be absolutely certain about these intentions. But that does not mean we cannot attempt to identify and understand them. We can collect evidence for these matters both in the text and in its context. In conventional children’s literature, especially, an important context for understanding any individual text consists of the many other similar texts a well-read critic knows already.

I can see no reason why critics should not focus on how texts might be inviting specific responses from their readers. I believe that texts—indeed, uses of language generally—do often communicate what their authors wanted to communicate. Street signs that invite us to stop usually encourage most drivers to stop. Texts for children that encourage them to emulate characters who realize they have erred and vow to obey their parents do encourage at least some children to obey their parents—or, at the least, to understand that obedience is what the text is encouraging.

While what texts invite readers to understand is often positive, they can also have more negative effects. They can manipulate readers in ways readers may not actually approve of. They can invite agreement with the claims they make about how

reality works—about matters like class, money, gender, race, sexuality, body image, personality, individuality, and so on and so on. They can reinforce conceptions about matters like these that authors might not have been all that aware of—matters so constantly affirmed by powerful forces in the world around us that authors often do take them for granted and convey them without having intended to do so, and, therefore, convey them as unquestionable truths that might well undermine a reader’s potential to think differently. As Gubar rightly suggests,

We are always channeling the voices of other people, ventriloquizing but also deviating from and improvising on the many different and sometimes conflicting discourses that inform our lives and shape our identities. The work of wrangling all these competing voices and influences—of forging a sense of self and attempting to express ourselves to others in ways they can comprehend—changes as we age, but it never ends. (“Risky” 454)

I have to wonder, though, how much wrangling can occur in relation to voices we are not even aware are working to shape our identities as children and adults. Having myself become aware in my long life of things I once took for granted—various ugly kinds of sexism, the unconscious racism of my white male privilege, to offer just two examples—I have to wonder to what extent

my sense of my current self emerges from other nasty cultural assumptions of which I am not yet conscious. Until invited to become similarly aware, many others share this kind of cultural blindness. Some of them produce texts for children. Some of them *are* children.

In order to explore such matters, I tend to approach texts in terms of how they might be read by an implied reader: one with the skills and attitudes required to make sense of them as might have been intended, that is, as they appear to be inviting readers to respond. Peggy Whalen-Levitt once described the notion of an implied reader as a way of thinking about “what a given text calls upon a reader to know and to do: to know, in terms of experience of both life and literature; to do, in terms of producing a meaning for this particular text, in time, from start to finish” (159). Mavis Reimer builds on these ideas by suggesting that “the questions Whalen-Levitt proposes could be extended to include, among other things, what a text calls upon a reader to enjoy or to value, or not to know, or not to do” (4–5)—matters of the ideology of the text. Reimer adds that

conceptualizing the implied reader as a set of knowledges and skills makes it possible to think beyond a single anthropomorphized figure to imagine a range of reading positions from which the text is legible—from the minimum of skills and knowledges needed to decode a text to something

approaching an ideal reader, who is able to fill in all of the gaps in the text and to trace the intertexts from which the text is woven. (5)

Among these reading positions in texts for young people are implied young readers—ones that best exemplify what authors might hope would happen to young readers of their work. Considering these matters, we critics can explore how the implied readers of texts for children engage ideas of the child as what Reimer identifies as “a constructed category deployed within cultures for specific, interested purposes (often identified as ‘political’ purposes) rather than a natural category of human being” (3).

Written by older people who perceive their audiences as inexperienced enough to need to be written for and in the process of learning their world, children’s literature is, I believe, inherently didactic. Even nonsense poems teach readers new to literature about the pleasure of nonsense. Much of what children’s literature hopes to convey by means of its implied child readers is well worth children learning. Nevertheless, no matter what specific values or constructions of childhood implied readers represent, they are—as are a vast range of adult educational practices— inherently at odds with the independence of young readers and centrally implicated in the process of trying to shape readers’ ideas of who they are or should be. Paradoxically, then, even texts that



... a utopian view
of the resiliency and
agency of children
... downplays the
forces that might and
all too often do limit
their ability to act
independently.



purport to encourage children to act independently or creatively are in the process of attempting to persuade readers to a desired end. I think we do a disservice to real children if we lose sight of that fact and its potential downside.

Critiquing *The Hidden Adult*, Rudd argues for more critical attention to readers as independent actors by proposing that texts do not in fact have implied readers, at least not any that can be specifically defined: “one either has a far more restricted notion of what a text implies [or] recognizes that texts are inexhaustible in casting shadows—forever being renewed by current cultural concerns. . . . In other words, it becomes less a question of a shadow text than an open-ended cultural dialogue that will have endless contributions to its conversations” (85). True. But that does not mean that we should not pay attention to one side of the dialogue: what the text contributes and how it takes part in shaping the conversations readers have with it.

Among the things that texts for young people invite their readers to know and to do are common elements that cause me to identify them as children’s literature. Objecting to “the idea that ‘children’s literature’ is a coherent, viable category that critics might work to define,” Gubar contends that “insisting that children’s literature is a genre characterized by recurrent traits is damaging to the field, obscuring rather than advancing our knowledge of this richly heterogeneous group of texts” (“On Not” 210). It is true that texts identified as children’s literature can be very different from one another and that their differences need critical attention. But my knowledge of the publishing practices that have engendered so many of these texts and the cultural and educational theories and practices they have worked to sustain tells me that focusing on how they are different to the exclusion of acknowledging ways in which they might be similar seems equally foolish. We cannot really

understand the significance of their differences without being aware of what they share. Most important, ignoring what they share might lead us to ignore what we take for granted about them most, and what we take for granted might well be bad for us. It might be the very thing that is working to limit the ability of readers to respond independently—not just children but adults, including literary critics.

Without an implied reader, without a sense of the importance of what texts for young readers share, we end up with a view of children's literature criticism like that expressed by Kimberley Reynolds, who suggests that, while the idea might be premature, it might eventually

be preferable to redistribute materials now studied as "children's literature" across the sphere of literary and other relevant areas of study. Medievalists would then look at medieval writing for children; those working on texts from former colonies would include the materials created for and read by children in their cultures, and so it would go until writing for children was absorbed into the mainstream of academic research. (125)

Or we end up with a position like Gubar's that focuses on the good things some children do with and make out of texts. I see the former as a dismissal of the ways

that children's texts are both different from other texts and often surprisingly similar to one another, exactly in terms of the ways in which they address children and construct ideas about childhood that might well offer children limiting views of their own agency. I see the latter as an overly optimistic wish-fulfillment fantasy—a utopian view of the resiliency and agency of children that downplays the forces that might and all too often do limit their ability to act independently.

Resistance to those forces is not easy—even for adult critics. Unhappy with my view that the idea of a need for a literature especially for children logically emerges from adult conceptions of children as other and different from themselves, Gubar proposes instead what she calls a "kinship model of childhood," which "is premised on the idea that children and adults are akin to one another, which means they are neither exactly the same nor radically dissimilar. The concept of kinship indicates relatedness, connection, and similarity without implying homogeneity, uniformity, and equality" ("Risky" 453). It is true that individual children and individual adults have this sort of kinship, but the idea that adults generally and children generally possess it seems to reinscribe the very idea of children as a group separate from adults—in other words, as not "exactly the same"—that the kinship model is meant to challenge. I claim a more radical position: children and adults are not inherently different by virtue of their

age and their likeness emerges from their shared state of being individually different from all other human beings. Despite our cultural commitment to ideologies that assume differences between people on the basis of their age, despite a huge preponderance of texts for young readers that insist on and work to inculcate those differences, children are us, their differences from us inscribed by cultural forces rather than inherent in their state of being young. Similarly, we adults are just as likely as younger people to buy into cultural categories that define the groups we belong to in terms of their difference from other groups—and, therefore, we are just as prone to accepting generalized ideas about those groups that diminish both our own ability to act in ways that express our individuality and the ability of others to do so.

My work as a scholar of children's literature has focused on questions about how texts construct childhood with the understanding that awareness of how that happens can help both adults and children move past the limitations of those constructions and be liberated at least to some extent from them. In other words, I have understood it to be a form of political activism. But, as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus say in a plea for a form of criticism less concerned with reading the ideologies lurking in texts, "Where it had become common for literary scholars to equate their work with political activism, the disasters and triumphs of the last decade have shown that literary

criticism alone is not sufficient to effect change" (2). I strongly doubt that anyone ever proposed that writing an essay about the gender assumptions of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was going to single-handedly bring on the revolution and establish world peace. But I also have to dispute the implication that literary criticism does not effect change. I know that my work in university classrooms and written discourse often had the effect of raising awareness of how texts work to construct their readers and their readers' values—of helping others I interacted with to develop skills of critical thinking that allowed them more space in which to act as individuals and challenge how texts invited them to see themselves. I also know that many of the education students I taught then helped the children they interacted with in their own classrooms to develop those same skills. The entire world may not have changed for the better—but I am immodest enough to believe that a lot of individual people did change for the better to a significant degree.

Furthermore, I continue to view that as being a good thing. Far from leaving children and others voiceless, learning to read in these more aware ways does anything but deprive them of their voices. As Crystal Bartolovich says in response to Best and Marcus's pleas for more accepting and less ideologically oriented critical practices, "literature, like everything else in our world that is structured by inequality, is a site of struggle, whether we acknowledge the struggle or not" (118). Not acknowledging it or simply focusing

on positive examples of young people responding creatively enough to texts to avoid being negatively affected by them may seem more comforting, more optimistic, about the effects of literature on children and other people. But I believe that my own more suspicious and less comforting approach is, in the long run, more optimistic about the possibility of empowering readers of all ages.

In his critique of *The Hidden Adult*, Richard Flynn says, “The implicated reader is not the only possible

position that actual readers may assume. One possibility is that a child reader may be a resisting reader” (142). A child may well be. But a child—or for that matter, an adult critic—aware of what there might be in a text to resist being implicated in is more likely to be a successful resister. That potentially resisting child reader, perhaps not immediately apparent in the text of *The Hidden Adult*, was the reason behind my writing it—the hidden child I believe it implies and hopes to help develop.

Works Cited

- Alderson, Priscilla, and Tamaki Yoshida. “Meanings of Children’s Agency: When and Where Does Agency Begin and End?” Esser et al., *Reconceptualising* 75–88.
- Bartolovich, Crystal. “Humanities of Scale: Marxism, Surface Reading—and Milton.” *PMLA* 127.1 (2012): 115–21. Print.
- Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. “Surface Reading: An Introduction.” *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1–21. Print.
- Esser, Florian. “Neither ‘Thick’ nor ‘Thin’: Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood Relationally.” Esser et al., *Reconceptualising* 48–60.
- Esser, Florian, et al. “Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: An Introduction.” Esser et al., *Reconceptualising* 1–16.
- , eds. *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*. London: Routledge, 2016. Print.
- Flynn, Richard. “Ambivalent, Double, Divided: Reading and Rereading Perry Nodelman.” Rev. of *The Curse of the Evening Eye*, by Carol Matas and Perry Nodelman; *The Hunt for the Haunted Elephant*, by Carol Matas and Perry Nodelman; *A Meeting of Minds*, by Carol Matas and Perry Nodelman; *Of Two Minds*, by Carol Matas and Perry Nodelman; *The Proof That Ghosts Exist*, by Carol Matas and Perry Nodelman; *Behaving Bradley*, by Perry Nodelman; *A Completely Different Place*, by Perry Nodelman; *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children’s Literature*, by Perry Nodelman; *Not a Nickel to Spare: The Great Depression Diary of Sally Cohen*, by Perry Nodelman; *The Same Place but Different*, by Perry Nodelman. *Jeunesse* 3.1 (2011): 137–51. Print.
- Gubar, Marah. “On Not Defining Children’s Literature.” *PMLA* 126.1 (2011): 209–16. Print.
- . “*Peter Pan* as Children’s Theatre: The Issue of Audience.” *The Oxford Handbook of Children’s Literature*. Ed. Julia Mickenberg

- and Lynne Vallone. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. 475–95. Print.
- . "Risky Business: Talking about Children in Children's Literature Criticism." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 38.4 (2013): 450–57. Print.
- Merriam, Sharan B. "Assessing and Evaluating Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Research and Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*. Ed. Sharan B. Merriam. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002. 17–33. Print.
- Nodelman, Perry. *The Hidden Adult: Definitions of Children's Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008. Print.
- . "On the Border between Implication and Actuality: Children Inside and Outside of Picture Books." *Journal of Children's Literature Studies* 7.2 (2010): 1–21. Print.
- Oswell, David. "Re-aligning Children's Agency and Re-socialising Children in Childhood Studies." Esser et al., *Reconceptualising* 19–33.
- Reimer, Mavis. "Readers: Characterized, Implied, Actual." *Jeunesse* 2.2 (2010): 1–11. Print.
- Reynolds, Kimberley. "Introduction: Research and Theory." *Children's Literature Studies: A Research Handbook*. Ed. M. O. Grenby and Kimberley Reynolds. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2011. 123–27. Print.
- Rudd, David. *Reading the Child in Children's Literature: An Heretical Approach*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2013. Print.
- Whalen-Levitt, Peggy. "Pursuing 'The Reader in the Book.'" *Children and Their Literature: A Readings Book*. Ed. Jill P. May. West Lafayette: ChLA, 1983. 154–59. Print.

Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Winnipeg, Perry Nodelman is the author of three books and about 150 scholarly essays about various aspects of children's literature. A fourth book, *Alternating Narratives in Fiction for Young Readers: Twice upon a Time*, is scheduled for publication in 2017 by Palgrave Macmillan. He is the 2015 recipient of the International Brothers Grimm Award for children's literature criticism. Many of his essays can be downloaded from <<https://uwinnipeg.academia.edu/PerryNodelman>>.