

# children's

## 'Twas Ever Thus? ~ and What to Do about It

**Perry Nodelman**

University of Winnipeg, Canada

Recently, Marie Davis, Editor of *Canadian Children's Literature*, invited me to do a review article covering all the picture books published in Canada in the past year or so – over a hundred of them. I accepted. It seemed like an excellent way for me to get a sense of the current state of children's publishing in my country – as indeed it turned out to be. What I had not expected was how depressed the task would make me, how exceedingly depressing the current state of children's publishing in Canada – and for that matter, in North America and elsewhere – actually is. Let me explain why.

The books Marie sent me were vibrantly colourful and for the most part, proficient in style and design. They ably represented how technically accomplished, how dependably professional the Canadian picture book industry has become in the few short decades of its existence (there was very little publication of picture books, or indeed, of any kind of children's literature, in my country before about 1975). Indeed, that was the problem. The books were assured and competent, textbook examples of what the picture book as a genre has become on our continent, perhaps on our planet, in our time. But that's about all. There was little here that was fresh or innovative or even all that imaginative. Viewed as a group, these books were depressingly similar to each other, depressingly similar to picture books being produced in the USA and internationally, depressingly similar to countless thousands of picture books produced in the last century. They were something like children's literature yard goods – nothing special, just more of the same bland serviceable stuff.

As I thought about it, I realized there were good – and depressing – reasons why that should have been the case. The most obvious one is the current fragile state of the Canadian children's publishing industry – a fragility marked in the conventional quality of the books it now produces. Recent events have made the production of Canadian books for children a perilous enterprise. First, a series of mergers has led to the domination of the bookselling business by one large firm, Chapters Indigo, which, as a near-monopoly, has the power to enforce a dangerously self-serving

return policy, demanding the right to return books it has ordered from publishers whenever it wishes. Publishers must then spend the money to produce enough copies of books to fill all the Chapters stores, in the knowledge that a large proportion of them will come back unsold – for big box stores like Chapters merely like to advertise that they offer a vast assortment of titles and make no particular efforts to sell any specific ones of them. That means more publishers' money tied up in fewer books, and so those books will inevitably be the ones their publishers perceive as most likely to sell well – the most conventional ones. Then, the bankruptcy in 2002 of Stoddart, an important publisher of children's books, and its associated company General Distributing, the largest book distributor in the country, resulted in chaos and further cash-flow problems for the many other publishers whose books were held hostage in General's warehouses for some months. Meanwhile, a series of right-leaning and singularly tight-fisted provincial governments across Canada have enforced ongoing cutbacks in writers' and publishers' grant programs that have traditionally fuelled the industry, and further cutbacks in the school and library budgets that account for most sales. There has also been a decline in the number of younger human beings born in Canada and the rest of North America; according to the 2003 Canadian census, there were over half a million fewer Canadians between the age of 0 and 9 than there were between the ages of 10 and 19. In a time of TV and video games, there has also been a decline in interest in reading amongst the fewer young people there are. All these factors come together to discourage publishers from being too daring in their choices of what to publish.

Most significantly, however, the free flow of books across the Canada-USA border allowed by the North American Free Trade Agreement has made the publication of books exclusively for the Canadian market financially unfeasible. It's revealing that almost all of the picture books I looked at, produced in Canada by primarily Canadian publishers, announced themselves on the verso of their title pages as being published or distributed both in Canada and in the USA., and that almost all provided an American address as well as a Canadian one. Many of them even offered American spellings rather than the usual Canadian ones – no national 'honour' here, I'm afraid. Without some sales in the American market, a Canadian children's book is unlikely to break even, let alone hope to make a profit for its publishers. The publishers of all of these books were, then, clearly hoping for success in the USA.

Unfortunately, furthermore, success in the USA these days demands an ever-narrowing set of constraints and conditions. Similar changes in bookselling and cutbacks in school and library budgets have affected Americans as they have Canadians. Meanwhile, the multi-national corporations that own just about all of the significant firms producing children's books in the USA have little interest in literature as anything other than merchandise, and in the spirit of good business practice and the tyranny of the bottom line, demand an ever-increasing level of profitability from ever-diminishing publishing programs. As a result, each title must make more money. Inevitably, fewer innovative or even mildly unusual books are

being published, and increasingly more effort is being made to appeal to the most popular and potentially profitable segments of the market: TV and movie tie-ins, series books, imitations of previous best-sellers, books with clear connections to subjects and concerns mandated by the curricula of the most heavily populated states. In other words, an increasing proportion of the books published in the USA are deliberately a lot like other books previously published – and therefore, a lot like each other.

It's no surprise, then, that in aspiring to appeal to the exact same segments of the same market, the Canadian publishers of the picture books I looked at should have produced books so depressingly like each other and so like so many other children's picture books produced before and elsewhere. The same goes for novels – except for the sometimes quirky books produced by small regional publishers supported primarily by government granting programs and less dependent on wide sales, there's little being produced outside of slavishly imitative efforts to cash in on the Harry Potter phenomenon and series like Scholastic Canada's pedagogically useful *Dear Canada*, fictional diaries by young girls placed in important moments of the Canadian past – the series itself is modelled on the parent American company's *Dear America* series. Indeed, the situation in Canada is desperate enough that a literary agent recently told me that the chances of a free-standing children's novel – one not intended to be part of a series and not by an author with an already-established sales record – being published by a mainstream Canadian press were slim to none. Unless your name is J. K. Rowling or you are a someone like Madonna whose pre-established celebrity guarantees sales for just about any combination of words you (or your ghostwriter) should happen to throw together, the same seems increasingly true outside of Canada also.

And thus, my depression. In North America – and perhaps elsewhere also – we exist in an economy and a political environment in which excellent, unusual, innovative – or for that matter, interesting – children's books are highly unlikely to be produced. Young readers are sentenced to yet more and more of the competent and uninspired sort of books I found myself reviewing for *CCL*. There will be yet more cautionary tales much like a long tradition of cautionary tales and whimsical fantasies much like earlier whimsical fantasies. There will be yet more stories about cute delicate fairies, cute bumptious gnomes, cute talking animals in human clothing, cute princesses with cute strange powers, cute and sublimely ingenuous middle-class children with the souls of poets or cute but sad middle-class children with sibling or parent problems, or cute and incorrectly happy middle-class children with various sorts of chips on their well-dressed shoulders, said chips happily removed by the end. There will be yet more commitment to exceedingly conventional ideas about what children are or should be and to assumptions about what story experiences adults should provide for young people that have been prevalent throughout the history of children's literature.

Ah, but there's the thing – that's what give me pause, stops me cold in mid-rant. These

things *have* been prevalent throughout the history of children's literature. The fact that there's nothing new going on here means that business is going on more or less as it usually has been. So is there really any special or unusual reason for me to be depressed? Sure, some sad and scary things have happened recently. Some sad and scary values are controlling the agenda. But when have they not? Are things really all that different or that much worse than they have ever and always been? Perhaps, I find myself trying to tell myself, not. Perhaps 'twas ever thus. Perhaps I have simply turned into another annoying old codger lost in the fog of my failing memory, bemoaning the loss of a non-existent golden age, sometime inevitably before now, when things were purely wonderful and no one ever had to burp or compromise or die. Perhaps there never was such a time. Perhaps children's publishing was always more or less the way it is right now.

I find myself thinking back to a golden time of my own, the mid-seventies – a time when the Canadian children's publishing industry was just beginning to exist as, simultaneously, I myself was just beginning my adult experience of reading, teaching, and writing about children's literature. As a newcomer to this exciting material, I certainly did experience it as golden. Secluded in the insular world of adult literature, I had never imagined the delights of a Maurice Sendak, a Pat Hutchins or a Charles Keeping, of an E. B. White or Louise Fitzhugh or E. L. Konigsberg or William Mayne. So many fine stories, so many terrific pictures, so much that was fresh and imaginative and unexpected and exciting. I felt like Shakespeare's Miranda on her first view of a sexy hunk: 'O brave new world,/That has such people in't.' To which her more experienced and less horny father said, 'Tis new to thee.' In the seventies, older hands at children's literature than me might have told me the same. Indeed, if I'm honest, I have to admit that even back then I was aware that not everything was so completely glittery. For every Sendak or Pearce I delighted in, I was also discovering gangs of Carolyn Keenes and Enid Blytons, groups of silly or preachy and vastly vulgar picture books about pigs or puppies, gaggles of Judy Blumes and countless other providers of pat solutions to supposedly typical teenage traumas. Troop of fairies, squads of mice and gnomes. Cuteness everywhere. Even more significantly, and as my own critical writing later went on to declare in some detail: these brave new books I was delighting in were not so completely new and innovative as I was imagining. Distinctive as it was, Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* revealed its author's knowledge of a long history of fantasy generally and time-slip fantasy in particular, and Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* turned out to be most interesting as a variation on a story pattern used also by Beatrix Potter and Virginia Lee Burton and numerous others. What was new to me was not necessarily so new after all.

Nor, if I think about it, could it ever be. In its essence, as writing done specifically for inexperienced beginners, children's literature is a simple literature. It's possible for clever, imaginative writers to do elegant, even complex variations on its characteristic themes and patterns. But those themes and patterns are characteristic,

I believe, simply because they are basic, the ones writers across history have constantly identified as the most elementary components of the literary experience, the ones most comprehensible to beginners. The further a text written for children diverges from them, the less likely it is that many people will recognise it as children's literature.

In *Children's Literature Comes of Age*, Maria Nikolajeva postulates an evolutionary process inherent in the nature of all literary production, and therefore inevitable in the production of texts written for children: newer texts are always and inevitably less simple than their predecessors. As a result, 'more and more children's books today are approaching the modern (or postmodern) adult novel...Children's literature, which emerged several thousand years later than mainstream literature, is now catching up to it' (10). This ought to mean that, for instance, Stevenson's *Treasure Island* is less complex and sophisticated than Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*, a later book in the same adventure genre; or that Montgomery's *Anne* books are less complex and sophisticated than, say, the novels in the recent American Girls series; or that Verna Aardema and Leo and Diane Dillon's *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* or Anthony Browne's *Gorilla*, award-winning picture books of previous decades, are less complex and sophisticated than recent medal winners like Simms Taback's *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* or Bob Graham's *Jethro Byrde – Fairy Child* – or for that matter, than any of the hundred or so Canadian picture books I recently looked at. And in fact, they aren't. Most children's books now are as much like most other children's books and most books for children always were. Whatever tendencies to complexity the field has, writers and publishers are always drawn back to basics by the simple fact that, however much adults might know and be bored with the same old stories, the audience of children that books are being bought for, at least as it is understood by those who do the buying, is always new – and new to these stories. What strikes me and other adults as old hat will be, most purchasers of children's books believe, excitingly strange for most child readers. And in fact, it probably will be just that.

Reminding myself of that goes some way towards diminishing my depression about the hundred picture books I reviewed. For many inexperienced child readers, books like these are an entry into what will strike them as a brave new world.

Furthermore, the specific economic circumstances that led to them being so ordinary and me being so depressed by them may be extreme – but economics have always been a factor in the nature of children's literature, ever since the crafty John Newbery realised it could be a way of making money some centuries ago, while simultaneously inventing the tie-in, toys that came with the books even before there were fast food places to sell them in. Economics always dictates that you get rich by giving the public what it already wants and believes it needs. Hence, most children's literature produced in most places most of the time.

Yet – and as has been the case throughout its brief history – serious academic

discussion of children's literature continues to concentrate on the relatively rare exceptional books of the kind that Nikolajeva focuses on. Trained in a literary scholarship that privileges complexity, serious scholars of children's literature are naturally drawn to such books – and prone most often to discuss them as if they were complex puzzles to solve, without consideration of how operating with that assumption might miss the point of the texts' status as writing for inexperienced readers. At a recent children's literature conference, I found myself yet once more witnessing the strange spectacle of fully grown adults with advanced degrees proudly displaying their ability to understand slightly complex texts like M.T. Anderson's *Feed* or Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*, without any apparent awareness that their ability to make sense of *any* text published for audiences of inexperienced young people might actually not be all that surprising. Many of the authors of recent journal articles seem much more informed about various more complex approaches to the ideology of texts written for children – approaches that at least take their relative simplicity into account. Often, however, they justify their interest in the texts by claiming to discover subtle depths beneath the apparently conventional ways of constructing female or childhood subjectivity – ways that, in a context of a major thread of contemporary cultural studies, presumably offer child readers empowering means of resistance. And more often than not, these articles ignore the influence of the material culture that produced the texts – the workings of financial and cultural capital in the markets they emerged from, the economic and political forces that helped to shape those markets and the nature of the texts they could and did produce – forces like those I described earlier at work in Canada today. As a group, we critics remain focused on distinctiveness and excellence – more interested in what's different and special about the texts we explore than in what they share with other texts of children's literature and why they might share it

If I acted as the usual practice of children's literature criticism implies I should, then, I'd have two choices about how to respond to those hundred Canadian picture books. I could identify the most ordinary books as unworthy, and focus my attention on the few that seemed complicated enough to need interpreting by my sophisticated adult mind. Or I could focus on the ideological work done by the books, with the goal of showing how any of them I happened to admire offered alternative scenarios or means of resisting mainstream values. In either case I would be ignoring what I know and reported above about the economic factors that helped to shape the books. I would also be ignoring my own conviction that, unlike serious adult literature, texts of children's literature are almost always most interesting not because of the ways in which they differ from other texts of their kind, but for the ways in which they are similar to them.

In its few decades of existence, children's literature criticism has accomplished much. But as long as we who practice it believe that it's the most complex and unusual books that most need our attention, and as long as the attention we give ignores the material contexts that police complexity and distinctiveness, the more we

will still have to learn about what children's literature is and why it is that way. As far back as 1985, I argued that 'the similarity of good children's books to each other makes children's fiction different from adult fiction – different enough that it requires its own interpretive approach' (Nodelman 1985, 6). So far, at least, few steps have been taken by surprisingly few critics towards finding that approach.