

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

The Case of Children's Fiction: or The Impossibility of Jacqueline Rose

by Perry Nodelman

If the argument Jacqueline Rose presents in *The Case of Peter Pan* were correct, then an issue of the *Quarterly* devoted to the topics of language and style in children's literature could not in fact exist. You have that issue before you, and I think Rose is seriously wrong in her assessment of children's literature; but the conclusions she reaches, in a book with the inflammatory subtitle "the impossibility of children's fiction," are true enough and important enough to demand the serious attention of anybody interested in children's literature.

Baldly stated, Rose's thesis is that children's literature is an enterprise of much greater significance for adults than for children. We adults write (and market, and review, and discuss) children's books not for children, but for ourselves, and we do so in terms of a notion of childhood that has far more philosophical and psychological relevance for us than it does for the presumed audience of youngsters.

Rose proposes that our contemporary notion of childhood is still firmly based in ideas first presented by Locke and Rousseau in the eighteenth century, and centering on the supposed purity and innocence of children. Not yet contaminated by the values of the adult world, children supposedly have two wonderful gifts: an intuitive wisdom that allows them to understand the world directly and without confusion, and a blissful freedom from the complications of sexuality. In other words, children represent everything which opposes our discontent with, even our fear of, our own lot in life as responsible adults. In Rose's words, childhood is "a primitive or lost state to which the child has special access. The child is, if you like, something of a pioneer who restores these worlds to us, and gives them back to us with a facility or directness which ensures that our relationship to them is, finally, safe" (9).

"Safe" is the key word here. Rose believes that the realities of childhood threaten adults. For instance, the actual sexuality of childhood is bisexual, polymorphous, and in terms of our usual adult notions of sexuality, perverse—everything we have come to perceive, in our process of maturing, as chaotic and abnormal; indeed, "maturity" might well mean merely our acceptance of one specific kind of sexuality as "normal," and the accompanying perception that all others are perverse. The same is true in areas of life beyond sexuality: "mature" adults are those of us who have accepted the political, social, and cultural values of our parents, and who see other values, other ways of organizing perception and experience, as chaotic and threatening. Because we do so, and because we perceive that threat in those who have not yet learned to share our maturity, we then deny the threat by imposing a utopian and unreal vision of innocence and purity upon children, and by expressing that vision again and again in children's fiction.

In addition to reassuring us, this vision helps us in our efforts to deprive children to the realities of their childhood: "If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (2). The real propaganda of most children's literature is not what it suggests children ought to become, but rather, what it assumes they already are.

I think Rose is right about all that. It doesn't take much reading of children's books to realize that the "children" in the phrase "children's literature" are not real human beings at all, but merely artificial constructs of writers; as is true of all works of literature, each children's story implies its audience; and thus

each children's story reveals its author's assumptions about childhood. Rose is also right to insist on the limitations of those assumptions, and to demand our acknowledgement of them. In the often unconscious determination of writers to impose artificial ideas about childhood on their child readers, those writers do, often, fail real children—and anyone who cares for children or for children's literature should be conscious of that.

But Rose is quite clearly horrified by the fact that adults misrepresent childhood in children's literature—a horror explained by the appearance of her book in a series called "Language, Discourse, Society" which has as its purpose the discussion of how recent advances in linguistic, semiological, and psychoanalytical thought have "implications and repercussions for the current terms of cultural and political understanding"; Rose, who lectures on feminism, clearly has a political statement to make, and her politics demands her horror at the way children's fiction works to repress children.

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I don't particularly share Rose's horror. According to her logic, any attempt by adults to teach anything at all to children must be understood as an act of repression. At one point, she even uses the fact that parents warn their children that coins are dirty as evidence that adults want to retain the "purity" of childhood: "The association of money and childhood is not a comfortable one. Money is something impure. It circulates and passes from hand to hand" (87). Well, so it does; and what Rose forgets here is the simple hygienic fact that coins are dirty. People ought not to put them in their mouths, and children do need to be taught that; if teaching it is repression, I am happy to be repressive. Furthermore, Rose's upset about the way children's books imply a character for their audience causes her to forget the fact that *all* books do that—that indeed, much of the pleasure we have in reading fiction comes from our perceptions of the differences between who we actually are and who the books we read imply we are. Rose clearly derived exactly that pleasure from the children's books she read; I see no reason why children's cannot be taught to have it also.

In other words, Rose overstates an important case. Because I think the case is important, and because her overstatement of it might give people who don't like to consider such ugly ideas all the ammunition the need to justify their dismissal of it, I'd like to discuss the flaws in Rose's argument—and, I hope, show that, beyond the flaws, there still remains a not particularly attractive but unfortunately accurate picture of children's literature that we ought not to ignore.

The title of Rose's book, *The Case of Peter Pan*, suggests a basic confusion in its argument. On the one hand, Rose wants Barrie's *Peter Pan* to stand for children's literature. Like all children's fiction, it is "a soliciting, a chase, even a seduction" (2) of its audience; like all children's fiction, it hides the problems inherent in our use of language from its audience (41); like all children's fiction, it sets up the child as the "site of a lost truth" (43), and implies "a fully colonialist concept of development" (57); like all children's fiction, it blithely ignores the discoveries of Freud (65). On the other hand, Rose also says

that Barrie constantly violates the basic rule of children's fiction "that the adult must never speak in the voice of child" (69); indeed, she says, *Peter Pan* "runs counter to almost every criterion of acceptability laid down by writers on children's fiction which I discussed in the previous chapter" (72)—but in that previous chapter, *Peter Pan* represents those criteria. At one point, Rose sums up her perplexing argument by saying, "Peter Pan is peculiar, and yet not peculiar. . . ." (11).

This does, finally, make sense—although I have to admit that it took me three readings of the book to penetrate Rose's astonishingly turgid prose and figure out how. Finally, I realized that *Peter Pan* is peculiar and yet not peculiar because "it recapitulates a whole history of children's fiction which has not yet come to an end" (11); Rose sees Barrie's book as "a metalanguage or commentary on that literature" (84).

But despite its logic, this argument really doesn't work, for *Peter Pan* is too exceptional a book to be representative, even as a "metalanguage"; it is peculiar, both in its publishing history and in its tone. It weakens Rose's argument to suggest that this book which was not originally a novel for children represents the fact that no children's book is actually written primarily for children—especially when many other books that were actually supposed to have been written with children in mind could make her point for her better. And there are few children's books as egregiously sadistic as *Peter Pan*; Barrie's clearly sexual delight in exquisite tortures makes the tone of this perverse work quite different from that of just about all other children's literature. I suppose Rose would say it's representative because it surfaces a cruelty hidden behind and implied by the blandness of other children's books; which is merely to have it both ways.

Rose ends up praising *Peter Pan* because it is chaotic, inconclusive, and revelatory of perverse sexual attitudes; and she condemns just about all other children's books because they are simple, straightforward, unambiguous, and devoid of sexual content. Some of them are, of course—but far fewer of them than many adults like to admit. Rose ignores the ambiguity that underlies the apparent simplicity of most good children's books, for she seems to be determined to read children's books in terms of the quite limited and often wrongheaded assertions that critics and authors make about them.

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Rose has certainly, a good case to make about the inadequacies of much discussion of children's literature. She shows how writers for children almost inevitably ascribe an undeniably foolish evocation of utopian innocence to their own work, and she provides a valuable exposition of how such ideas about children's literature emerge from the work of Locke and Rousseau. From Locke comes the idea of a child's direct access to the real world, which allows children to bypass the imperfections of language and to understand intuitively; and

Rousseau's preoccupation with the original form of language. . . goes hand in hand with his interest in nature and the child. Innocence of the child and of the word—the concepts seem to draw on, or attract each other. Together they form something of a holy alliance which runs right through children's fiction to his day. The writing of Alan Garner is, I would argue, merely the most recent version of this. It has an almost identical conception of a language once pure and an uncorrupted culture or primitive state. If the child can still be in touch with that purity, then writing for children is the closest that we, as adults can get to it today. (49)

Consequently, children's writing is seen as a barrier to hold back the tides of anarchy. It contains no irony, no ambiguity, no wordplay, for it speaks in the direct and unconfused voice of childhood. It allows no doubts about the truth of the stories it tells, for "The writing that is currently being promoted for children is that form of writing which asks its readers to enter into the story and to take its world as real" (62). It speaks clearly in either the voice of a child or the voice of an adult speaking to children, with no confusions between the two; and "what all this suggests is that, in the case of children's fiction, the question of form turns into a question of limits, of irrationality and lost control, of how far the narrator can go before he or she loses his or her identity" (70). Put baldly, children's fictions is simple fiction, presumably because it speaks of and to the simplicity of childhood; and its simplicity ignores the actual complications of reality.

There's no doubt that discussions of children's literature do say such things. They say them far too frequently, and Rose is right to attack writers and critics for using both children and children's literature as weapons in a rigidly conservative attack on openness and flexibility. Far too many writers and critics want children's fiction to represent all that is true and good in both life and literature, as opposed to the supposed sickness and decadence and chaos of contemporary life and of all other modern fiction. The trouble with Rose's argument is that she actually *believes* these ridiculous comments that writers and critics make about children's books. In doing so, she misses most of what is interesting about children's fiction.

Rose claims children's literature is without irony—yet even simple picture books like Pat Hutchins' *Rosie's Walk* demand a perception of irony before they can be fully appreciated. She claims children's books demand absorbed identification without distance; but even a book that demands identification like Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* requires some distance before one can understand and enjoy the symbolic implications of the wild things, or even the doubleness of a sea voyage that represents events within the mind. If these simple picture books require distance and allow the perception of reality, then texts as relatively complex as, say, White's *Charlotte's Web* or Alan Garner's *Stone Book* certainly do so also. Rose claims that children's books singlemindedly support adult nostalgia for a theoretical innocence, and gives Garner's *Stone Book* as an example; and in doing so she ignores the complexities of *The Stone Book* itself, which ambiguously allows its "message" of nostalgia for the values of the past to be expressed in terms of a victory of ideas of evolution (ideas which were new and radical in the time it describes) over traditional religious ideas, and also the complexities of the *Stone Book* Quartet as a whole, which continually plays the rigidity of conservatism against its stability, and the freedom of new ideas against their anarchy. She claims that children's books ignore sexuality—and thus ignores the ways in which works like *The Stone Book* and *Where the Wild Things Are* speak to the polymorphous sexuality of childhood—ways that may not be readily apparent to an adult's sexual consciousness but that nevertheless enrich these books. She insists that we are meant to read Jim Hawkins's narrative in *Treasure Island* as a statement of unquestionable truth; and in doing so she misses the paradoxical relationship of Jim's moralistic narration and the exuberance of his younger self that it describes.

In fact, Rose is herself guilty of the unquestioning innocence that she says, quite rightly, is not in fact a quality of children; perhaps that unquestioning innocence is the exclusive property of writers with axes to grind. She accepts Jim Hawkins' flawed interpretation of his past in the teeth of the evidence of the very events he describes; she accepts Alan Garner's comments on his work as the whole truth about it, and ignores the book he actually wrote. And in directing her attack on children's literature, Rose misses a more deserving target: the misleading

and dangerous rhetoric that we find all too often in discussions of children's literature. It may have been foolish of Alan Garner to misrepresent his own writing in his comments on it—although, given the consistency with which such ideas appear in journals directed towards the adults who actually buy children's books, and the obvious comfort many adults take from such ideas, it's not hard to understand why he might have done it; but it is even more foolish of Rose to have believed him, and thus ignored the real richness of his fiction.

Meanwhile, Garner's fiction—and much children's literature—is indeed rich: rich in irony, in ambiguity, in linguistic subtlety, even in truthful evocations of childhood sexuality. And because it is, we can devote the space we have given in this issue of the *Quarterly* to discussions of linguistic (and pictorial) subtlety. Adults can and do present complex visions of reality to children in children's books. Rose is wrong: children's fiction is not impossible.

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What is impossible is the false view of childhood and the misrepresentations of children's literature we find still in far too many discussions of children's literature—in silly books like

Jonathan Cott's *Pipers at the Gates of Dawn* which purport to find a source of wisdom for adults in the ignorance of childhood, and in many writer's celebrations of the wise innocence of their audiences. Such comments turn the discussion of children's literature into a political battlefield where adults use highly distorted ideas of childhood and of literature as weapons to hurl at each other. Such battles distract our attention from children's books, and prevent us from reading them with the passionate involvement that will reveal their richness to us. Even worse, they distract our attention from the realities of childhood, and prevent us from rightly perceiving the richly complicated lives of real children. In pointing out the impossible silliness of such attitudes, and in pointing to "the contradictions and difficulties which more urgently need to be addressed in relation to how our culture constitutes and reproduces its image of the child," (112) Rose deserves to be heard. Children's books are not as repressive and as conservative as Rose suggests they are—but writing about children's literature frequently is, and that's a great pity.

REFERENCES

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articles of interest

The Roots of Response

by Hugh Crago

Editor's Note: This article is a revised and enlarged version of a paper delivered at M.L.A. 100, (Washington, D.C., December 1984, by Hugh Crago on behalf of Maureen and Hugh Crago.)

Fortunately, I need not begin by justifying my topic: if some of us did not consider the literary experience in early childhood worth studying, then a special section under this title could hardly have been included in MLA 100. I do however need to define some terms. In common with most others who have observed the interaction between young children and books, I have taken "literary experience" to mean the experience of visual as well as verbal texts, and you will see me use "text", "fiction" and "literature" all in this extended sense. Secondly the word "response" in the title of this paper is there in deference to established usage, rather than because it carries the best range of implications. Child-book interaction is a complex, systemic process which is inadequately and even misleadingly represented in the linear language of stimulus and response. More of that shortly.

I may be known to some of you as the co-author of *Prelude to Literacy*. *Prelude* is the published report of five years' observation and recording (undertaken primarily by my wife, Maureen Crago) of our daughter's experience of fiction prior to her learning to read. If you have read our book, you may well have shared the disappointment expressed by reviewers like Bonnie Lass and Grant Noble at the way we focussed on the particular rather than the general. It's as if Maureen and I wandered through a forest, exclaiming over individual trees and clumps of trees, but rarely indicating that we knew anything about the shape and composition of the forest as a whole. Only in the final chapter, which our publishers (for reasons best known to themselves) retitled "Epilogue", thereby suggesting

that it was a set of afterthoughts rather than a proper conclusion, did we give a sketchy aerial map of that forest. Maureen reminds me that to an extent, this was quite deliberate. We wanted our readers to share our own experience of seeing shape and pattern emerge only gradually from a mass of detail. It's also true to say that as we have gained distance from our material, we have likewise gained skill in discerning the general, in guessing the generalisable. So in this paper I have tried to supplement *Prelude* with some thoughts on the kind of data that we and others have so far gathered on the literary experience in early childhood—what the inbuilt limitations of our methodology and our data might be, and what wider questions are raised by our reliance on them. Having done that, I then summarise some of the patterns that we ourselves found in our data, those patterns that seem most likely to correlate with the ones discovered by other investigators working in this field. In other words, I am asking first, "what are the risks in generalising?" and second, "given those risks, what can we tentatively say that might be generalisable?"

The best evidence we yet have of the experience of literature in early childhood has been provided by one particular form of research, the participant-observer case study, based on "parent diaries." Parent diaries record observations of one or two children (occasionally more) listening to stories read or told by a parent (most often, the mother) in a home setting. The suitability (indeed, the virtual necessity) of this method for the preschool age group is obvious. Children of elementary-school age have of course been studied by methods more generally favored in this century by behavioural psychology (structured tests, questionnaire, interview) but clearly, such techniques for gaining information would be difficult or impossible to utilize