Defining Children's Literature

Perry Nodelman

Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales, by Max Lüthi.
Translated by Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald. New York:
Frederick Ungar, 1970.

The Fantastic in Literature, by Eric S. Rabkin. Princeton, N.J.:
Princeton University Press, 1976.

Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E. B. White, by Roger
Sale. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978.

The Hills of Faraway: A Guide to Fantasy, by Diana Waggoner.
New York: Atheneum, 1978.

E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* are fantasies; Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* and James Joyce's "Araby" depict young people facing the limitations of a real environment. But *Charlotte's Web* is more like *Harriet the Spy* than like *Lord of the Rings*; *Harriet the Spy* more like *Charlotte's Web* than like "Araby." Beyond anything else, *Charlotte's Web* and *Harriet the Spy* are children's novels; and saying that they are children's novels gets closer to describing their special qualities than saying that one is a fantasy and one is not.

In *Fairy Tales and After*, Roger Sale says that "everyone knows what children's literature is until asked to define it." There is much truth in that. I suspect we call certain books "children's novels" because we recognize something special about the way they depict reality, and sense their distance from usual grownup perceptions of it. This is not to say that children's novels are "unrealistic," only that they describe a particular version of reality in a particular way—that the children's novel is, in fact, a distinct kind of fiction, a kind that we recognize even when we cannot put our fingers on what is special about it.

The books by Diana Waggoner and Eric S. Rabkin show how important it is to keep that in mind. They both deal with the subject of fantasy in general and include discussions of some children's

novels, and they both become unconvincing when they refuse to distinguish between children's novels that happen to be fantasies and other fantasies.

Waggoner says that the "Bibliographic Guide to Fantasy" which makes up the bulk of *The Hills of Faraway* "does not exclude 'children's' books; many fantasies written for children may be read by adults with enjoyment, just as children may read some 'adult' fantasies with pleasure." Her bibliography makes no distinction between children's fantasies and adult ones. It includes books as diverse as *Charlotte's Web* and Evangeline Walton's *The Island of the Mighty*, apparently presuming that they are more similar to each other in being "fantastic" than different from each other in other ways.

Because her bibliography covers "nothing but fantasy," Waggoner includes E. Nesbit's novels about the Five Children and ignores the ones about the Bastables. This is misleading; *The Story of the Amulet* has more in common with *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* than with *The Island of the Mighty*. For that matter, even Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* and Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain* books have more in common with *The Story of the Amulet* than they do with *The Island of the Mighty*. Garner, Alexander, and Walton all work with the same legendary materials. But like the children in *The Story of the Amulet*, Alexander's Taran and Garner's youngsters are unfamiliar with the worlds they find themselves in; the characters in *The Island of the Mighty* are not. It is, in fact, a characteristic of children's novels, fantasy or not, that they exploit the reaction of a newcomer or a stranger to the world they describe in a way that adult novels rarely do. And that puts readers of children's novels into a relation with the events described that is quite different from what it is with adult novels. A reader's enjoyment of the peculiar pleasures of such a perspective is far more significant than a taste for fantasy in general. In indiscriminately discussing adult fantasies and children's fantasies as if they were the same thing, Waggoner ignores most of what really matters about the books she discusses.

In *The Fantastic in Literature*, Eric S. Rabkin also treats chil-

dren's fantasies as if they were the same as adult ones. But then he treats almost everything as if it were the same as almost everything else. His definition of "the fantastic" gradually turns into an elaborately worded and distressingly simpleminded description of just about all human thought. As he says himself, "The structure of diametric reversal, which signals the fantastic in narrative, might, in theory, arise just as readily in any mental activity." He finally ends up wildly suggesting that all art, in imposing order upon the actual chaos of existence, is fantasy.

Rabkin's indiscriminating definition of "the fantastic" leads him to equate works as diverse as *Pinocchio* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; he says the two have "precisely the same reconfiguration of ground rules." While that may be true, it is not important. *Pinocchio* is different from Ovid, and it should be the business of criticism to make distinctions—perhaps, even, to explain why somebody who responds to *Pinocchio* is more likely to enjoy *Harriet the Spy* than the *Metamorphoses*.

While Rabkin and Waggoner both ignore important distinctions in their definitions of fantasy, they do so for opposite reasons. Waggoner believes that "the whole point of fantasy is to establish a credible universe," one based on the consistent depiction of a reality that includes "supernatural" elements. Consequently, she says that *Alice in Wonderland*, the reality of which is not consistent, is not fantasy: "Carroll expresses the dream-experience with unmatched skill, but dream is not vision, and dream-story is not fantasy." Meanwhile, Rabkin talks of "works we would unequivocally call Fantasies (for example, *Through the Looking Glass*)." For him, the essence of fantasy is inconsistency—"a quality of astonishment that we feel when the ground rules of a narrative world are suddenly made to turn about 180°"—and the Alice books are a touchstone.

Waggoner's touchstone is Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*—"the principal inspiration of my work"; in fact, she judges other books by the extent to which they are like *Lord of the Rings*. This is a dubious practice indeed, as Waggoner's disdain for Lewis Carroll reveals; he does not even appear in her bibliographic guide to "all

of fantasy." Meanwhile, the presumably fantastic *Lord of the Rings* is never mentioned in *The Fantastic in Literature*, even though Rabkin quotes extensively from Tolkien's critical writings. Novels of the sort Tolkien wrote are too consistent for Rabkin to consider fantasy, so he calls them something else—Enchantment: "within the world of Enchantment, everything happens according to rule."

That Waggoner and Rabkin so completely contradict each other suggests the major failing of both these books. They get so caught up in defending their theories that they lose sight of the very thing the theories are meant to explain. "Fantasy" is many different things, including both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Lord of the Rings*. It is so many different things that attempts to define it seem rather pointless. And that is particularly true when it comes to children's fiction. Much of it is fantasy, and much of it isn't; but all of it is clearly different from adult fiction. Neither Rabkin nor Waggoner is interested in that difference, and neither has much of value to say about children's fiction.

Rabkin and Waggoner both believe that fairy tales are not fantasy. But the children's novels they discuss are more like fairy tales than they are like adult fantasies. In fact, modern children's fiction has its roots in fairy tales, and many children's novels maintain the characteristic tone and atmosphere of fairy tales. For that reason, Max Lüthi's *Once Upon a Time* is an important book. Lüthi's discussion of the nature of fairy tales is detailed and persuasive. And it suggests much about the distinctive qualities of other children's fiction. Lüthi says that the "absence of all desire to describe unessential details gives the European fairy tale its clarity and precision." The same might be said of good children's novels. Lüthi also points to a sharp delineation of significant events and objects in an otherwise undescribed environment; an "isolating" technique which focuses attention on meaningful events and prevents consideration of other implications; the description of apparently self-sufficient scenes and the placing of them in an integrated structure, so that "the fairy-tale style isolates and unites"; and a matter-of-fact tone that allows our passive acceptance of wonders and our understanding of the virtue in the passivity of

fairy-tale characters to wonders. These qualities are all found in good children's novels, whether they depict a real world or an imaginary one. *Harriet the Spy* contains them as much as *Charlotte's Web* does, even though the "wonders" Harriet confronts are closer to the reality most of us occupy.

Unfortunately, Lüthi is not content to allow fairy tales the stature of mere artistry; he feels the need to justify them in terms of the needs of the audience. The audience nowadays is children, and children need to learn about life. So Lüthi follows the bad example of many other critics and turns fairy tales into psychological allegories, "concerned with portraying the essential processes of life." Our enjoyment of them is no longer a response to their artistry, their impeccable creation of a world different from our own, but to their therapeutic implications for ourselves in our usual reality. This is both unconvincing and unnecessary. I would not prescribe "Rapunzel" for children fearing maturity any more than I would prescribe *Hamlet* for grownups suffering Oedipal paralysis. To do so would be to miss the real point of fiction and the real pleasures it has to offer.

One of the virtues of Roger Sale's *Fairy Tales and After* is its utter avoidance of such therapeutic considerations. What Sale sees in fairy tales has nothing to do with the "essential processes of life" Lüthi talks about; in fact, he dwells on their essential otherness, the ways in which the world of fairy tales is different from our own: "I shudder and am grateful I am not asked to be good, to be me, to be alive in that world." In positioning himself as an outsider, a person observing a world he does not believe he is being asked to belong to, Sale becomes a particularly penetrating observer, not just of the world of fairy tales, but of the worlds described in the various novels he discusses.

Sale's main virtue as a critic is common sense; it is also his main failing. He judiciously refuses to claim more for his book than even the most niggly-minded of readers would allow, and he carefully circumscribes the boundaries of what he attempts. As he sees it, he writes in "the spirit of one wanting to write about very good books. . . . I write as an adult, and for other adults." His discussions

of very good books are very good indeed—always provocative and frequently wise. But he refuses to admit that he has chosen specific books to discuss for any reason other than his admiration of them or that his discussions of different books have anything to do with each other. And he studiously avoids noticing the implications of these discussions in terms of a deeper understanding of the special qualities of children's fiction.

Sale refuses to define "children's literature": "we are better off saying we all have a pretty good idea of what children's literature includes and letting the matter rest there." But paradoxically, his discussions of specific books return again and again to the same qualities, qualities that are both surprisingly like the ones Lüthi finds in fairy tales and surprisingly helpful in arriving at the definition of "children's literature" Sale himself avoids. Of the Oz books, for instance, he says that "the extraordinary freshness of the writing lies in Dorothy's never thinking about how she got where she is, or how she is going to get away, or how she might have done differently or have avoided danger." This is a quality Lüthi finds in fairy tales and that can be found in many children's novels, including all the ones Sale discusses. Sale also shows how all the novels he deals with work in terms of a joining together of carefully described episodes—a paradoxical episodic unity Lüthi noticed when he said the fairy tale style both isolates and unites. And Sale captures the peculiar character of children's fiction, fantasy or not, when he speaks of an "instinctive oneness with the surrounding world . . . the potential connection between the human and the surrounding."

Sale says that "children's literature is not a genre"; he insists that "the category 'children's literature' is too vague, too loose to allow much generalizing, and the great children's books are too different one from another to suggest more than the occasional comparisons between two or three." But *Fairy Tales and After* goes further toward defining children's literature as a genre than any other discussion of children's books I know of.

Unfortunately, Sale's refusal to acknowledge his accomplishment reinforces an old cliché that hampers criticism of children's fiction

mightily. The cliché is that a good children's novel is a good novel, period. That appears to claim too much for children's fiction, but it actually claims too little—like saying a good tragedy is a good play, period. Anyone reading a good tragedy with sensitivity must admit that is simply not true—and so it is with a good children's novel. We can say that *Charlotte's Web* is a good novel, and that, like any good novel, it is different from all the other good novels; but we also have to admit that *Charlotte's Web* is good in a way similar to the way that *Harriet the Spy* is good, and that the qualities we demand of good adult fiction (an integrated plot, a developing action, an intricate analysis of motive, to name just some) are not necessarily the qualities we expect of good children's fiction. Only by coming to terms with what is special about children's fiction *as* children's fiction can we come to understand its special power over us.