

New Voices in Children's Literature Criticism. Ed. Sebastien Chapleau.  
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**PREFACE: "THERE'S LIKE NO BOOKS ABOUT ANYTHING"**

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Scholars who study nuclear physics or structural anthropology or Jacques Derrida tend to be admired by other people because they know things the other people don't know--and for that matter, may not even care to know. The more obscure and mysterious their knowledge, the more respect most people will have for it. If it seems obscure and difficult, then it must be wise and important. That might explain why specialists in children's literature tend to get so little respect. When it comes to children's literature, everyone's an expert. Everyone knows already.

Madonna, for instance, knows already. In an interview explaining why she decided to write some children's books, the pop star says: "Now I'm starting to read to my son, but I couldn't believe how vapid and vacant and empty all the stories were . . . . There's like no books about anything." Madonna is not alone in her conviction that she can characterize all children's books based on the few she's actually managed to read, or that she already knows exactly what kinds of book children should be reading. The students and parents I talk to about children's literature are almost always confident about these matters, long before I try to share my own expertise with them. They know that children have short attention spans, large imaginations, and a great need of moral improvement. They know that children's books are generally if not exclusively about princesses who live happily ever after, children who err and learn better, and adorable fuzzy animals in jackets and, sometimes, trousers. They already know everything there is to know about children and children's literature--and are surprised and a little offended by my suggestion that there might be more to know.

As the essays in this collection so interestingly reveal, there is, of course, a lot more to

know. But I find myself wondering why so many people believe otherwise. And I find myself thinking that it has a lot to do with the very attitudes towards childhood that underpin the existence of children's literature in the first place.

Children's literature is centrally about not knowing. It came into existence when adults began to imagine childhood as a space necessarily separate from the world of adults, and separate because children needed to be kept from certain kinds of knowledge--to know less. By definition, since then, childhood has been primarily a matter of *being* less: less experienced, less knowledgeable, less reasonable, less responsible, less capable. It's almost always defined in terms of its variation from what is taken to be its opposite--adulthood--and the variation is almost always a matter of lack. As a result, children's literature is that literature which lacks--lacks sexuality, say, or darkness, or complexity or big words--that literature which says less. Madonna can be certain that "there's like no books about anything" because that's what most people believe children's books, by definition, are--book that are not significantly or deeply about anything, or at least about anything much. By definition, then, adults--all adults--simply in being adults, will always know more than children's literature can say. They will always possess an expertise that they will inevitably be assured children's literature cannot in itself possibly possess. How could they as adults not know more than children's literature does? And so what could experts in children's literature have to tell them? How could there possibly be more to know about that which itself knows and says so little?

Furthermore, if children's literature exists in order to allow children to know less, then children themselves are not capable of writing it. Its mere existence implies their innate lack of ability to do so--they lack the skill, the knowledge, the expertise. So it's adults who must provide children's literature for children, adults who must know what childhood is and who have the

responsibility of revealing it to children in books that describe it. These adults must pretend to know less in order to show children the lesser world adults believe children know--or, more chillingly, hope to persuade children they know. At any rate, the childhood of children's literature is always a construct of adult imagining, a matter of adult expertise that expresses itself in the act of hiding itself--disappearing as adult expertise from the texts of children's literature in which it appears as a supposedly authentic vision of childhood. When it comes to children, indeed, it is the central responsibility of being adult to know all about childhood--to be expert about it. That's what childhood is--that which adults must know about because children themselves can't.

Not surprisingly, the faith in adult expertise so inextricably interwoven into our most culturally powerful conceptions of childhood and children's literature must be blind to the possibility of a richer expertise--a greater knowledge than it is one's adult obligation to children to always have, a children's literature that says more or does more than one's own or at least the most common ideas of childhood suggest it must. As an intelligent and caring adult newly aware, as a parent, of her profound adult responsibilities towards children, Madonna can be certain that "there's like no books about anything"--that no one before her will have ever had the guts or the vision to imagine a children's literature that transcended the common conventions of a lacking childhood.

In knowing that--and in deciding to do something about it herself--Madonna is not unlike many newcomers to children's literature--scholars as well as parents. In my career as an editor, a guest editor, and a referee for a number of children's literature journals, I've often found myself dealing with submissions by scholars from other literary fields who share Madonna's experience of reading a children's book to a child and developing a sudden awareness of expertise, scholars

who seem then to say to themselves, "Hey, I could write an article about this book! An academic article about children's literature--what a fresh and new idea!" The work they then produce and submit makes it clear that they hadn't even thought of doing the bibliographic searches to find previously existing scholarship they would have performed as a matter of course after choosing to write about any other kind of text. They clearly believe that, when it comes to children's literature, there's like no criticism about anything.

More depressing, I've often found myself as a referee and writer of book reviews pointing out all the previously existing critical work on the topics being discussed--work the writers of the work I'm reviewing seem blithely ignorant of. There is something about children's literature--something about its connections with our ideas of childhood innocence--that invites even those who proclaim themselves its expert scholars to think of it as previously uncharted territory, a new found land they are the first ever to set foot on. It is up to each of us adults, it seems, to discover childhood anew and to imagine ourselves as its first saviours and civilizers

I'm happy to report that the new voices represented in this collection are not so innocent or ingenuous, and that they are deeply aware of the footprints left by those who walked that not-so newfound land before them. Indeed, what is most pleasurable new about these new voices is their awareness of and conversation with the old voices (including my own)--the way in which their placing of their work in the context of their predecessors makes it clear how very much a field of children's literature criticism does exist, how very much new expertise knows of, learns from, builds on and most significantly, challenges old expertise.

In his contribution to this collection, Peter Hunt, himself a wise old voice partaking in a new conversation, answers the criticism that the first edition of the overview of the field he edited, *The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, was uneven:

It seemed to me that the *Encyclopedia* demonstrated an astonishing range of attitudes as well as an astonishing range of knowledge. To that critic who called it ‘uneven’, one can assume, ‘even-ness’, similarity of tone, of ideas, was desirable. I would say the reverse. Not only would uniformity be impossible to achieve, I would not wish to achieve it. What I would wish to achieve would be an acceptance that each style and each approach commands respect and pivots on the central author-book-reader negotiation.

To some extent, I agree. As the range of essays in this collection and the range of critical resources and theoretical perspectives they refer to and build on make clear, the presence of many voices is indeed a good thing, a multiplying of perspectives that can only enrich our knowledge of children's literature. But that can happen only if the many voices are listening to each other--if they are, in fact, having a conversation. Unfortunately, for all the value of their work that Hunt so rightly points to, the contributors to that first edition of the *Encyclopedia*--like so many other contributors and would-be contributors to our knowledge of children's literature, like the scholars unaware of previous scholarship in the field and like Madonna announcing the lack of children's books about anything--were not always doing that. As typical adult experts on children's literature, many of them seemed completely unaware that anyone else was even talking. And that's a shame.

It's a shame because we children's literature specialists really did need to be listening to each other. In suggesting that all these different styles and approaches command respect, Hunt implies that each adds a different component to our total knowledge of the field--something like

the way in which Cardinal Newman, in his *Idea of a University*, imagined the disciplines each adding something unique to the totality of knowledge they all offered together, since "All that exists, as contemplated by the human mind, forms one large system" (33). But in fact, all the knowledge about children's literature represented in the *Encyclopedia* does not add up to one large coherent system. Rather than claiming separate parts of the total field, the different forms of expertise often offer competing visions of the same territory. What cognitive psychology has to tell us about childhood reading experience competes with what psychoanalysis or sociological theory has to say or what traditional humanistic literary scholarship simply assumes. They can't all be right. Not acknowledging each other allows all of them to retain faith in their rightness--to blindly offer yet more versions of the ignorant expertise so aptly represented by Madonna.

We would all get farther, I believe, if we paid attention to each other--if all of us experts in children and children's literature made ourselves aware of the ways in which we lay claim to same territory in differing ways, if we listened to each others' differing versions of the same aspects of our field and took on the hard task of negotiating a place for our ideas that acknowledges and tries to account for their relationship to all the other ideas. The result of these sorts of engaged conversations would be anything but the kind of uniformity that Hunt quite rightly sees as undesirable. It would be a more complex and more complete vision of the complex way things are. It would alert us to the contradictions and complexities not only in our discourse about childhood and children's literature, but in childhood and children's literature themselves.

I suggested earlier that the contributors to this book are having conversations with their predecessors in the field of children's literature. It's true, nevertheless, that in writing about quite different aspects of the field, they tend to refer to different predecessors, different theories or

bodies of knowledge, different forms of expertise. So the question remains: does this book represent the sort of complex discourse I've just been imagining? Are its contributors in conversation with each other?

In the most obvious way, of course, they are not. Having all written their pieces for the same deadline, each of them worked with a lack of awareness about what the others were doing. But in fact, a look at what they've produced as a whole reveals a complex conversation in progress--one that both continues and complicates discussion of some central threads in children's literature criticism.

Most central among those are the foundational binaries that I discussed earlier--the oppositions between child and adult, children's literature and adult expertise that underpin both the existence of a literature specifically for children and our ongoing adult interactions with it. In their purest form, these binaries represent impermeable borders--that which is childlike is by definition purely and absolutely non-adult--the opposite of adult--and so that which is children's literature is utterly devoid of--opposite to--the complexity, subtlety, and confusion of adult knowledge. But clearly, the separation of these presumed opposites is impossible. As well as being purely and blithely innocent of adult corruption (or purely and dangerously ignorant of adult wisdom), children are in the process of developing into adults--already always tainted, in being human, with the adult they are presumed to be opposite to. And children's literature, a product of adult expertise, always inevitably bears signs of the adult content it tries so desperately to deny and to hide. The binaries are not so opposite.

While they all do it differently, the essays in this collection all tend to disrupt the binaries--or to show how they are already disrupted. Laura Atkins speaks of a "schism" in the goals of publishers of children's books caused by the contradictory constructions of childhood

they try to maintain simultaneously. Katrien Vloeberghs describes how recent theories reveal the permeability of concepts of childhood, and Alison Waller how factual and fictional boundaries refuse to remain discrete in the discursive field of adolescence. In terms of reading children's literature, Virginie Douglas suggests that the novel she discusses questions "the old adult/child dialectic" and David Rudd describes how the one he discusses "troubles the adult-child binary." Karen Sands-O'Connor asks for further trouble, inviting scholars "to break out of rigid binary oppositions . . . and begin instead to focus on plurality, both in literature's content and meaning." Maiko Miyoshi focuses on plurality in suggesting that the writing by child characters represented within children's books "makes everything, (including the existence of adult author, character in the texts, and the reader of the texts who receives such writing) variable, vague and uncertain." Rebecca Rabinowitz extends the disruption and uncertainty to readers, recommending a focusing on "the bits and pieces of queerness"--that which is supposed not to be there--that observant readers can find in children's books, and Vanessa Joosen suggests that the texts she discusses can encourage children to become observant readers themselves--to develop a theoretically impossible adult expertise in reading disruptively.

In dialogue with these writers describing the permeability of borders are others who contribute to the conversation by focusing on the way in which borders work to keep things in or out. Ann Alston describes how the safely enclosing homes so central to children's literature remains present as an implied ideal even in descriptions of less protective homes. Gabriele Thomson-Wohlgemuth shows how children's literature internationally is becoming more uniform, less disrupted by national variations, and Dominique Sandis postulates that children's literature evolves from international paradigms--boundaries that might work to control the expression of national difference.

In focusing on question of borders and their disruptions, the contributors to this book offer an intriguing overview of the current state of our communal discourse about children's literature. They reveal two important things.

First, and most obviously, they reveal productive disruptions. As they work to reveal the permeability of the boundaries between child and adult, children's literature and adult expertise, they also disrupt the boundaries of the field of children's literature studies by showing how a wide range of other cultural and intellectual discourses might operate meaningfully within it. They reveal the abundant possibilities of an interdisciplinarity that reveals the limitations of the common adult assumptions about children's literature expertise and refuses to recognize academic borders.

But second, and perhaps less obviously: they reveal the significance of borders in the very act of insisting on their permeability. In her contribution to this book, Virginie Douglas suggests that the questioning of the conventional binaries "may contribute, in future decades, to the dying out – or at least the absorption into mainstream literature – of the specific literary category called 'children's books.'" Personally, I doubt that will happen. As long as there are developmental theorists and graded schools and parents afraid to let their children use public transit, as long as there is a childhood of unknowing which invites adults to be protectors of and experts for children, as long as there are Madonnas around to assert that there are like no books about anything, there will be a children's literature--a literature that will declare the ways children are unlike adults and require both adults and children to become aware of the ways in which those categories do and don't operate in the lives of all of us. This book helps to create that awareness. It is a book that is like very much about something.

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