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Expectations: Titles, Stories, Pictures

by Perry Nodelman

In *The Act of Reading*, Wolfgang Iser says that "throughout the reading process there is a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories" (p. 83)—between what we expect and what we actually get, between what we actually get and what preceded it. Louise Rosenblatt describes how, as one begins a story, "one evolves certain expectations about the diction, the subject, the ideas, the themes, the kind of text that will be forthcoming. . . . As the reading proceeds, attention will be fixed on the reverberations or implications that result from fulfillment or frustration of those expectations" (p. 54). Since literary critics who concern themselves with readers' responses make much of the expectations we bring to literature, I decided to explore the expectations of some of my students. My doing so told me much about responses to literature; and it showed my students both how they themselves could learn to respond to literature with more consciousness and appreciation of subtlety, and how they could better teach those skills to children.

At various times during the children's literature course I taught last fall, I asked students to record their responses to

parts of the same story: first the title, then the first sentence, then the story as a whole. I used Chris Van Allsburg's *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* for a number of reasons. First, the book is new enough that I thought few students would be familiar with it; in fact, only one was. Second, the story follows some of the basic story patterns of children's literature that I intended to discuss in the course, in particular, the "home-away-home" pattern, in which a character, a child or animal, leaves a home he is dissatisfied with, and has adventures that teach him to appreciate the home he returns to better. I wanted to see if knowledge of its conventional aspects would change my students' responses to this book. Third, I wanted to point out to them how pictures can control our response to a text, and I thought the pictures in *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* were unusual enough to make that point for me.

At the beginning of the course, I asked the students to describe the expectations aroused in them first by the title, then by the title and the first sentence. Some weeks later, after we had discussed a number of the qualities and patterns of children's literature, I asked them if their expectations had

changed. I then read them the whole story, and asked them to compare their actual experience of it with their expectations. On a later occasion, I asked them what sort of pictures they expected; then I read them the text while I showed them the pictures, and asked for comments on the relationship between what they expected and what they actually saw.

I was also teaching another section of the same course; for the sake of comparison, I followed the same procedures with these students, but I didn't begin until after our discussion of basic story patterns; that way, I could see if previous experience engendered different sorts of first responses.

My student's original responses to the title of the story reveal their expectations both of stories in general, and of children's stories in particular. The mere fact that I told them *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* was a story led them to expect a certain sort of experience: a set of events that would be interesting, rather than, say, a list of types of vegetables or a description of a tourist attraction:

"I expect from the title that I will like the story because many things happen in gardens." "The story is probably full of incidents that occur in connection with Mr. Gasazi's precious garden." "I expect there to be some sort of conflict with the garden which will be resolved by the end of the story." "I expect that some problem will arise concerning the garden or an event will take place there." "It may be a good story where a problem is solved and they live happily ever after."

These students clearly know what a plot is, and how it is different from a record of actual events in the real world.

Some of my students' comments revealed specific expectations of children's stories; they expected a fantasy, usually one involving the humanizing of inhuman objects:

"The story is probably a fantasy with lots of action—perhaps some magic and some humor." "Fantasy—magical garden." "Story about a man who had a magical garden." "Abdul Gasazi has a magical garden." "I expect it to be full of wondrous plants and animals in a faraway land." "My immediate reaction is that if it were to appeal to children the garden should have some magical quality." "He probably grows something that children will find amusing." "I instinctively think of some 'strange' plants or objects to be found in the garden."

The more specific expectations of a few students suggest a greater familiarity with other children's stories. A few referred to specific types of children's stories:

"I think this story will be a fairy tale." "I expect an oriental fairy tale." "I expect this will be a story filled with fantasy, as in the 'Arabian Nights'." "Plants out of control—much like 'Jack and the Beanstalk'."

A few comments suggested some knowledge of the distressingly didactic nature of most children's fiction:

"This could be an enjoyable fairy tale where true love conquers all and brings more happiness than all the money in the world." "Through the help of others, including the kind Abdul, the conflict is resolved." "I see Abdul as a kind man and I expect him to know all about his world and how to right the wrongs in it." "The criminals and Mr. Gasazi finally end up making peace and living happily ever after." "Gasazi withheld produce in retaliation for being mistreated, but when all around were starving, compassion for his fellow men urged him to share." "Children will like this story as it ends happily and the characters are kind." "Positive response from children—they would learn about sharing."

As in these last two examples, a number of responses reveal assumptions about the supposed audience:

"The flowers in the garden have names and personalities just like many children in a classroom do." [That, by the way, is an accurate quotation.] "It's my feeling that most children would like this book as the story would likely deal with food and growing, two topics children generally enjoy." "There would probably be a moral ending. I don't think I would personally enjoy it, but most children probably would."

Like many adults who know little about children's literature, these students have expectations, not about the literature, but about its intended audience.

Most of these students expected stories about a gardener, or about somebody who owned a garden; only a few expected the story to be about a child. But when I conducted the same experiment with the class that had already experienced part of the course, they usually assumed the central character *would* be a child—and that his name would not be Abdul. While those who knew less of children's literature imagined that something unusual would come to the garden, those who knew more expected that the garden would be unusual and that somebody ordinary would come to it. They realized that most children's stories are centrally about children and their adventures away from home:

"It would be about a character introduced into an unusual world, as Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*." "Protagonist intrudes into garden, overcomes wicked owner by craft." "Somebody is going to be sent to the garden for being bad." "A story of a child who goes into this garden and explores the interesting and dangerous things in it." "Perhaps a home-away-home pattern where the child learns

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something about life." "This title suggests to me that this is probably a story about someone's adventures in a wonderful, fantastical garden." "The experience in the garden will be much like an escape into the boy's imagination." "Garden that fascinates children—Abdul a big powerful man, creates awe in children." "It could portray the fun and adventure a boy would experience in a garden." "Probably about things which happen in Abdul's garden and how a child (boy) deals with or reacts to it."

I had discussed many other children's stories with the first class between the time they responded to the title and first sentence and the time they heard the rest of the story. So I asked them to record whether or not their responses to the title and first sentence had changed. About two-thirds said they now had different expectations. A number now *did* expect a story in which a child left home, had adventures, and returned; and one referred to a different pattern we'd discussed: "the story may now be about a day in the life of Abdul Gasazi and what happens in his garden." Some acknowledged they could now make distinctions they couldn't before:

"I expect a 'good' story (from a literary point of view) because it doesn't sound like a 'drugstore-type' book but more sophisticated." "I used to think that simple vocabulary, simple plot was enough for a children's book. Now that I have read a number of children's books I would expect to be more critical." "I'm not sure why I found the first line deflating last time. This time I'm curious as to

what Eunice is going to do with the dog, and what will happen to the dog."

These comments suggest an interesting paradox: the more my students knew of the conventions of children's literature, the more curious they were about how this story might diverge from them; they anticipated more pleasure because they could now perceive both patterns and divergences. In this way, their knowledge of conventions acted like the schemata that cognitive psychologists speak of, or the redundancy that information theorists believe allows us to communicate sophisticated messages; in all three cases, what we know and expect is a guideline that allows us to understand what is new about new experiences. And the more complex our schemata, the greater the redundancy, the more we expect, then the greater the amount of new information we can absorb.

Some did say their expectations were no different after they'd learned more about children's literature; I choose not to believe them, simply because the other class, who had not told me their expectations until they had studied some of the characteristics of children's literature, almost all provided more specific responses, and almost all expected more conventional versions of children's stories. A number expected stories about a child who enters a magical garden. Some expected an example of what I had called "A-day-in-the-life-of" stories: "About a person from a culture foreign to me. It probably will be a short story depicting something about his culture and way of life. It will include some kind of adventure or his typical day, as it develops along."

Thus far, my experiment reveals only that we use whatever we know in our attempts to understand something new—and that the more we can identify the conventional, the more we can appreciate the new and distinct. What follows shows how different sorts of readers use their expectations, and how that affects their enjoyment of what they read.

For most of my students, the title *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* suggested magical adventure in a foreign land; so they were surprised by the pet dog and the decidedly unexotic cousin of the first sentence: "Six times Miss Hester's dog Fritz had bitten dear cousin Eunice." A few expressed no surprise at all: "The first line confirmed my expectations of the title." A second group expressed surprise, but then simply dropped their original response:

"My expectations have changed drastically. Instead of thinking that the story would be very imaginative (fantasy) and different, it appears to be based very much on regular day-to-day occurrences (i.e. a dog biting another person is not exactly the most exciting and different occurrence). Judging on the first sentence, I don't think it may appeal to children as strongly as I had previously thought." "This story sounds North American. My expectations have greatly changed." "I was very surprised by the first sentence. My expectations have changed."

Some expressed surprise—and annoyance or confusion at being surprised in this way:

"My expectations have been changed. Miss Hester's dog could very well be my neighbour's dog, which is a reality. Thus, for me, the reality of the situation would prevent me from reading the book. All the fun has been spoiled. There would be no pleasure in reading this book. Too much pain." "I'm confused. I couldn't even predict what the story is about." "I feel cheated." "It doesn't appear to indicate any such story as I have expected." "This is not what I expect. I am surprised—and confused." "The beautiful garden I was visualizing just shattered apart."

A third group found some way of integrating the title and the first sentence that accounts for the apparent confusion—and discounts the surprise:

"The first sentence fits into my expectations of the story. Miss Hester's dog was flown by magic carpet to Abdul Gasazi's garden as a punishment for his naughty habit of biting." "My expectations have changed. The dog's name could be Abdul Gasazi." "Now I expect the dog to be thrown out by the cousin and will find a friend in the garden where he takes shelter." "I expect that the story would be about a dog who lives in an imaginary garden. There he has friends that love him whereas in the real world he is mistreated and abused—unloved." "The story is still about a garden and all the flowers witnessed the dog bite Abdul's Cousin Eunice." "About Cousin Eunice who works in the garden and the conflict with Fritz, who keeps biting her because of the color of her work pants."

The responses I've outlined so far seem to represent different sorts of bad reading strategies. Those who weren't surprised at all simply weren't paying enough attention: Van Allsburg surely wants us to be surprised, for the story that follows is a strange blend of the mundane and the magical that its title and first sentence separately imply. Those who were surprised and then dropped their original response were not making use of the information they had noticed; they were paying too much attention to the words on the page, and not enough to the effect that those words were having on them as they read. Those who expressed confusion were heading in the right direction, but didn't go far enough; they didn't realize that they were meant to be confused, and they didn't hold onto their realization until

"These students also assume that predictability is a virtue. . ."

such time as the story allowed them to make use of it. Those who merely integrated the information were in fact not reading Van Allsburg's story at all. At this point, his story is far from complete, yet they had in fact, imagined it completed. Whereas those who immediately changed their expectations paid no attention to the effect these words were having on them, this group paid attention to nothing else; they responded to Van Allsburg's words as merely a stimulus for their own creative endeavours.

I conclude that bad reading comes in at least three varieties: paying no attention at all, paying too much attention to the text and not enough to its effects on oneself, and paying too much attention to those effects and not enough to the text. If so many of my relatively mature students indulged in these unproductive strategies, I suspect that most children do also; we need to teach them better strategies.

A few of my students adopted a quite different strategy. They paid careful attention, and they allowed themselves to be equally aware of both the text and their response to it. They remembered their original response to the title, even though they knew the first sentence meant that that original response was incorrect; and they were willing to wait for a satisfying answer to what they now perceived as a problem:

"The title remains a puzzle. Since Abdul Gasazi has not been mentioned in the first line I'm left wondering what the mysterious garden might have to do with Fritz and Eunice. Who or what is Abdul Gasazi?" "There must be something about a garden, but it no longer sounds that way." "I was surprised because the first sentence did not much relate to the title. I coped with this surprise by thinking that my first expectations were still to come." "I'm no longer certain that

Abdul is the central character. It sounds like it's more complicated than I expected." "It is a confusing first line as compared to the title. It is difficult to formulate any clear idea of what is to follow." "Expectations change—this encourages the reader to read further."

These students seem to know that the story they would eventually hear would negate neither their original expectations, nor the new ones engendered by the first sentence—that it would most likely integrate the two in a way that makes both necessary and inevitable, despite their apparent contradiction of each other, and that therefore their original impressions should not be forgotten. One comment reveals much about how good readers keep information on hold until they come to need it:

"This opening line does not necessarily hold the whole meaning of the story. It can just be one episode that is important to the story. The dog need not be a major character. . . . I don't think assumptions can be made by knowing the first line. This is not a whole story, and not a lot can be gained from it."

Since this last group of students seems to reveal some understanding of useful reading strategies, their responses to the story as a whole ought to be different from the others. Were they?

The first group, those who expressed no surprise, also showed little ability to make use of the difference between the actual story and their original expectations; they made comments like "Very different from what I expected" or "It wasn't what I expected." The second group, who dropped their original expectations on hearing the first sentence, tended to feel that consciousness of expectations was not terribly fruitful:

"First impressions/expectations can be a downfall because the story may not fulfill them." "Sometimes first expectations can be of sheer disillusionment. If a child thinks the story may be of sheer delight, he/she would probably be very disappointed if it were otherwise." "No help in original expectations, without hearing story." "My expectations from the first sentence were closer; they would help in trying to evaluate the story."

Most of this group imply that consciousness of expectations would be useful only if one could use them to guess the *right* story; they didn't realize how their own *wrong* expectations made them more aware of the unique qualities of the story.

The third group, who expressed annoyance, continued to be annoyed:

"The story is very different from what I thought it would be. I'm not sure that I like a mixture of fantasy and reality on that level of children's stories. It certainly is less conventional than children's stories which I have read and am reading to children in a classroom now." "The story itself was enjoyable but the title misleading. Had there been a different title, I could have predicted much of what happens." "I felt that I enjoyed it in spite of the first sentence; but the first sentence set me apart and I didn't become involved as quickly as I can with other stories." "The author's choice of words could be better, since they initially didn't set up the right attitude of expectation."

These students also assume that predictability is a virtue; they reveal their lack of literary sophistication by demanding adherence to conventions.

The fourth group, who integrated title and first sentence into plots of their own invention, expressed great surprise that Van Allsburg's story was different from the ones they'd invented themselves—but they didn't feel their surprise was useful:

"The story varied greatly from what I expected it to be about. . . . I don't believe that looking at these expectations helps to understand a story." "The variations between my expectations and the actual has not really helped me to come to grips with the actual story because a title or even the first line is not necessarily indicative of what is to come next."

Such readers depend so much on their own "creativity" that they both over-indulge and mistrust their expectations; I suspect many of them have learned to do so from teachers who put a large premium on individual responses to literature, without any sense of obligation to the intentions of a text.

The last group, whose strategies seemed more promising, saw more significance in the distance between their original expectations and the actual story:

"It seemed from the title that it would be boring, but it didn't turn out that way. You can't judge a book by its title. From the title, it didn't sound like a children's book." "It certainly was not what I expected; however I have noticed that with many children's books the titles do not necessarily state what the story is about. The title is often inappropriate so if one just went searching for a good children's piece of literature, do not just go by its title." "Although I was not absolutely correct in my expectations, in retrospect neither was my interpretation farfetched. I feel that it is helpful to the extent that there was a similar quality of feeling expressed—mystery, intrigue, magic." "The difference is helpful in understanding how expectations change as you read."

Only the last two of these students suggested how they might use their knowledge of their original expectations to understand the story better "in retrospect"—going back and thinking about how it happened to them and why it happened that way. But almost all of them felt called upon to theorize about literature, even though the papers they wrote on were not signed and they would get no grades for doing so. They had a greater willingness than did any of my other students to stand back from their acts of reading and discuss how they happened—and I believe that is the basic impulse that separates aware readers from those who enjoy literature less.

Finally, I asked my students what sort of pictures they expected to accompany the words they had heard; then I showed them Van Allsburg's pictures. Once more, they revealed how much convention operates in their understanding of literature; almost all expected that this children's fantasy would be illustrated with bright, colorful pictures in a cartoon style; almost all were surprised by the pictures they saw; and their surprise made them surprisingly appreciative of the pictures' uniqueness and appropriateness.

Some, indeed, expressed disappointment that convention was not being met: "The pictures seemed very dull in comparison to the stories." But a surprising number moved past surprise to a deeper understanding of the book as a whole:

"Seeing the pictures changed the tone for me to a more serious sort of story. I expected it to be the funny, unrealistic sort of story throughout. As a children's book I expected and wanted to believe in a certain tone for children. This is why I never thought of it as serious." "The pictures are better than I expected. They are appropriate to the story because they, like the story, don't underestimate children. They aren't childish and silly." "Oh, I'm so confused! These pictures were very different from what I expected, and as a result made the story much more entertaining." [This last student had expected to enjoy the conventional pictures she had imagined herself.]

One final example sums up how these students become aware of the conventional nature of their own original responses. The student had expected a Miss Hester who "will have a nice body, and will be pretty, maybe black or some other race." After seeing the pictures, the response was, "Better than expectations—not sexist like I thought. 'Miss' does not mean young and pretty."

My experiment showed me a number of things. It confirmed my belief that we do in fact respond to literature in terms of our previous expectations and our understanding of conventions. It showed me that greater knowledge of conventional patterns sharpens expectations and creates more interest in the way particular stories vary from them—in the unique qualities that are the most interesting aspects of literature. It showed me that poor readers tend to seek fulfillment of conventional expectations rather than the pleasure of the unexpected, and it also showed me that a surprising number of adults don't know how to use their expectations and their knowledge of conventions to become more aware of the unexpected. Finally, it persuaded me that teaching this skill to people of all ages—and especially to children—would greatly increase their pleasure in good literature.

I Am the Cheese and Reader-Response Criticism in the Adolescent Literature Classroom

by Phyllis Bixler

The idea of using Robert Cormier's *I Am the Cheese* for a reader-response project in my "Literature for Adolescents" course came a paper Perry Nodelman delivered at the 1983 ChLA Conference, later published in *Children's Literature in Education*. By comparing his first with subsequent readings of *I Am the Cheese*, Nodelman demonstrated how "Robert Cormier does a number" on the first-time reader. By alternating taped interviews with bike journey scenes and childhood recollections, by withholding narrative connectives as well as some crucial information, by providing a barrage of clues about Adam and his family—many of which prove misleading—Cormier cleverly disorients and confuses first-time readers not only to create the surprises requisite for a good mystery novel, but also to make readers think like the "paranoid" they may have at first believed Adam to be. As readers eventually learn that Adam and his parents are in fact the victims of government corruption and organized crime, that Adam's parents have been "terminated" because of what they may know and that Adam is kept drugged in a sanatorium until he "obliterates" (*I Am the Cheese*, p. 219-20), readers replace their "common sense faith in the abiding security of normalcy" with "deep cynicism" (Nodelman, p. 101). Unlike the cynicism of *The Chocolate War*, Nodelman asserts, the cynicism of *I Am the Cheese* is "convincing and thoroughly unsettling" because, "in [Wolfgang] Iser's terms, *I Am the Cheese* forces us to participate in its meaning" (p. 101).

By the final weeks of the spring semester, 1984, when my students recorded responses to two readings of *I Am the Cheese*, we had moved considerably beyond the primarily historical and formalist analysis they tell me characterizes most of their other literature courses. During earlier class discussions, we had looked for what Iser calls "the implied reader" in books written specifically for adolescents, and a few books that were not. My students had constructed lesson plans based on my adaptation of Margaret Early's three stages of literary appreciation: unconscious enjoyment, active participation in the story as vicarious experience, and aesthetic appreciation of the story as

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Perry Nodelman's Words and Pictures: the Narrative Act of Children's Picture Books will soon be available from Neal-Schuman, Inc.

story. To further lay the theoretical groundwork for the assignment on *I Am the Cheese*, I gave a brief lecture on the emphasis placed on the author, text, and reader by various kinds of literary criticism—historical, biographical, "New," and reader-response criticism. I also extracted a few key ideas from Iser's "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," extractions which I gave my students on a handout along with directions for recording their first readings of *I Am the Cheese*. (Only two of my twenty-seven students had read the novel before; I had, of course, instructed them not to read it before we began this assignment.)

My directions asked them to stop reading and record their responses after each of the first five chapters, at least three more times when they were especially aware that their interpretations of the text were changing significantly, and at the novel's conclusion. They were asked to note, 1) any "gaps" in the text (Iser's word for unanswered questions posed by the text) and how they filled those gaps (answered those questions); 2) some of the "data" they found themselves paying special attention to and their reasons for finding this data significant; 3) conclusions they had drawn about what they had read and expectations of what would follow; and, for chapters after the first one, 4) ways in which they had been led to revise earlier conclusions about and expectations of the text. Finally, they were to reread their responses and write a brief description of what they had learned about the process of reading a literary text or anything else of value they discovered. To get them started, I read aloud the first chapter, gave them time to record their responses, and led a very general discussion to make certain they understood what I wanted them to do.

My students' questions provided a good, brief introduction to what we would learn about the reading process. One student, for example, commented that she needs to create visual images of the characters and events. I admitted that my directions had not specifically called for responses to visual imagery—to make the assignment more manageable, I had eliminated Iser's