

editor's comments

The Objectionable Other, or, Walter de la Mare Meets My Little Pony

by Perry Nodelman

The articles in the special section of this issue deal with aspects of the lives of children that experts in children's literature often feel superior to. For educated adults of good sense and good taste, the most obvious response to a book with wheels attached to it or a Walt Disney image of love's young dream is horror. "This," we say, "This is what the world has come to? This is what we feed the tender imaginations of our young with? This pap? This garbage? This insult to good sense and good taste?"

But despite our own smug invulnerability to such insultingly vulgar objects, we nevertheless believe that the real trouble with them is not just their bad taste; it is the fact that children do like them so much. Surely something so obviously silly and vulgar should not be so enjoyable. Surely something so enjoyable must be bad for those who enjoy it. So we view aspects of popular culture for children with great alarm—and then, most likely, we turn our backs upon the offending objects, dismiss them from our thoughts, and purify our minds of the tainting stench by immersing ourselves in that which is truly great and truly inspiring; we imbibe a poem by de la Mare or a novel by Eleanor Cameron not because they are inherently enjoyable but as Peewee Herman antidotes. If we think at all about popular literature for children or about the mass culture of toys and television and such, it is merely to point out how inferior they are in relation to that which is truly worthwhile.

In this we are not alone—it is a common habit of high-minded people to attack the artifacts of popular culture in defense of real excellence. Tania Modleski speaks of "the tendency of critics and theorists to make mass culture into the 'other' of whatever, at any given moment, they happen to be championing—and moreover, to denigrate the other primarily because it allegedly provides pleasure to the consumer" (*Studies in Entertainment* 157).

These are dangerous attitudes, I think. They depend on two assumptions, one arrogant and one silly. The silly assumption is the puritanical one that pleasure is always a bad thing, a sign of dangerously unproductive self-indulgence; any worthwhile work of art has to be important, serious, and therefore, obviously, no fun at all. The arrogant assumption is the elitist one that what most people most easily like is inevitably both bad art and bad for them—that they aren't smart enough to know what's not good for them. Both assumptions are wrong.

The main (maybe the only) thing art has to offer is pleasure. The only good reason for reading Walter de la Mare or Eleanor Cameron is that they are a pleasure to read. Even art that makes us think is merely offering us the pleasure of thinking. It's surely not the intention of artists to be educational, to teach us important things about important subjects; in my own experience, what people say they've learned from a work of

art is always in fact something they already knew, and in any case, what a novel or a painting might actually happen to teach us could always be learned more easily in less circuitous ways—if Shakespeare had merely wanted us to understand that he who hesitates is lost, a simple five word statement would have been more efficacious than *Hamlet*. Those who really don't like to think but force themselves to experience serious art because it's good for them, because they'll learn to be better people from it, are rather missing the point; and as for the theory that great art can ennoble us and lift us above ourselves, I believe it was George Steiner who once pointed out how that theory was contradicted for eternity by those high-minded Nazi officials who read poetry and listened to Beethoven recordings before they went off to inspect the gas chambers.

As for the second, dangerous assumption: to feel superior to those who enjoy what's popular is to deny the obvious fact that much of what gives us pleasure in high culture resides in what it shares with popular culture. In addition to what is essentially Picasso-like, Picasso offers us the same basic sensual enjoyment of line and shape and color that we find in Superman comics; at the heart of *King Lear* is a satisfying fairy tale about a youngest sister who does better in a contest than her two older sisters; and the profiles of nuclear physicists that appear in the *New Yorker* offer the joys of gossip, just as do the profiles in *People*. Which is to say, merely, that high art is not the opposite of popular art—not its "other" at all, but merely an extension of it, a variation on the same basic patterns and pleasures. Neither high culture nor popular culture is particularly good for us; both have the main purpose of offering us pleasure.

The main difference between popular art and high art is that high art is harder to learn to appreciate—and therefore, harder to take pleasure from. By definition, popular culture appeals to a lowest common denominator ability to enjoy; it offers pleasures we all (or at least the largest number of us) can share, usually by giving us exactly what we expect in a form just superficially different enough to seem new—for instance, another situation comedy about a family that is eccentric in a slightly different way than were the families in the other situation comedies we've already seen. Indeed, the inherent widely-based enjoyability of popular art is neatly confirmed by the fact that most of us who actually do enjoy high art nevertheless have our secret trashy vices, indulged in moments when comfort is required: those of us who are honest will surely have to admit to a secret passion for romances, perhaps, or slasher movies, or superhero comics (I am myself a sucker for TV beauty contests). But high art offers less immediate comfort, for the differences in it are

more than superficial; high art tends to refer to familiar patterns or archetypes in order to undercut or to change them, so that what emerges is less significantly familiar than different. High culture offers not just the pleasures of the familiar but also the pleasures of distinctiveness—it gives us something we did not expect rather than merely confirming our expectations. It gives us Picasso as well as basic form, unique poetry as well as a fairy tale.

Now it is possible to read *King Lear* as a fairy tale, and to enjoy it as such—and to miss what is distinct and most specifically pleasurable about it. It is possible to read *New Yorker* profiles of nuclear physicists in order to get the dirt about famous people, and to enjoy them as such—and to miss pleasurable insights into science and culture that distinguish such profiles from those in *People* magazine. And it is possible, never having read anything but *Choose Your Own Adventures*, to expect all novels to have the exciting plots of *Choose Your Own Adventures*—and to quickly get bogged down in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Taking pleasure in that which is distinct as well as in that which is expectable is a learned skill, and it is arrogant indeed to feel superior to those who have not learned it—especially if we know that nobody has tried to teach it to them. It is especially arrogant when it is an attitude expressed towards children who enjoy Punky Brewster on TV instead of reading novels by Virginia Hamilton: if we believe that Virginia Hamilton can be pleasurable too, then we need to teach younger readers *how* to take pleasure in her work.

That is why it is dangerous to dismiss the mass culture designed to appeal to children from our consideration when we think about children's literature. If we want to help children to a greater enjoyment of good children's books, we need to understand what they know already, and we need to use our understanding to develop ways of showing them how to extend that knowledge into new and alien territories. Because Saturday morning cartoons and the imaginative world implied by the advertising for *My Little Pony* form the context in which children read literature, we need to understand the meaning, the characteristic structures and implications of the Saturday morning cartoons and the *My Little Ponies* before we can hope to understand how children read literature. If we do not understand the contexts which define children's literature for most young readers, then we will not be able to find ways of teaching them how to develop other contexts.

In choosing the relationships between popular culture and children's literature as the topic for this issue's special section, the *Quarterly* editors had hoped for articles that would consider the ways in which things like Saturday morning cartoons and *My Little Pony* might influence a child's reading of literature. While the articles you will find here do not always spell out the connections, they do indeed offer some understanding of some popular cultural contexts past and present into which the "good" literature for children fits. We rejected many other submissions, however, not because they were not competent discussions of popular culture, but because so few of them tried to analyze relationships between popular culture and so-called "good" children's literature. That's not particularly surprising—a glance through any journal of popular culture quickly reveals that those interested in writing about it are often rather mindless celebrants of its joys, and just as dismissive of the elitism of "good" literature as the proponents of good literature are dismissive of popular culture. When it comes to the culture of childhood, apparently, popular culture

and good literature continue to be each other's "other"—the alien evoked merely to be dismissed.

I hope the articles in this issue will help to lessen the distance between these two "others," which are obviously less distant in the lives of real children than they are in the minds of most scholars. And I hope this issue will stimulate thinking that will encourage the writing of more articles in this important area.

Before that will happen, however, a lot more specialists in children's literature will need to be persuaded that popular culture is more than just offensive trash to be avoided—that it has meanings and patterns that can and do significantly influence both the adults and the children who enjoy it, and that those patterns and meanings are therefore worthy of analysis. For those who need to be so persuaded, I suggest a fascinating book. *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* is a collection of essays edited by Tania Modleski that offers a number of subtle analyses of various aspects of popular culture—or mass culture, as these essays perhaps more accurately call it—from fashion to the *I Love Lucy* show. The critics represented in this volume are working at trying to understand popular entertainment in the context of contemporary literary, social, and psychoanalytical theory; their arguments are often based in the work of thoughtful commentators like Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan. They never talk about popular entertainment specifically directed at children; but what they do talk about is provocative indeed—and suggests much that might well stimulate further thinking about the relationship between popular culture and children's literature.

To take one example: television is the aspect of popular culture that probably bulks largest in the lives of most children. Many of the essays in *Studies in Entertainment* refer to and grow out of Raymond Williams' concept of television as flow—as a continuous sequence of events rather than the discrete unities we expect of other forms of narrative. Television programming continues uninterrupted all day; and emerging as it does from the context of that continuous flow of information, each separate program lacks the discrete wholeness, the sense of a separate beginning and ending, that we expect and demand of novels and poems. Furthermore, the narrative structures of individual TV programs are themselves constantly interrupted by commercials and news breaks and such, so that each segment of a story becomes part of a continuous flow of other kinds of information. That television characteristically structures events in this way suggests much about the narrative expectations that children who watch a lot of television are most comfortable with, and therefore, I suspect, approach literature with.

Since TV offers a continuous uninterrupted flow of information, we cannot and do not always give it our complete attention—we tend to watch intensely only that which specifically interests us, and learn to be inattentive to parts of its continuing message that we shove into the background—the commercials, perhaps, or the promos for other shows, or even parts of shows that don't interest us. In an essay called "Television/Sound" in *Studies in Entertainment*, Rick Altman says that ". . . there is a growing body of data suggesting that intermittent attention is in fact the dominant mode of television viewing" (42). Programmers who understand that take it into account; Altman describes how various aspects of TV sound are designed to attract our attention back to a TV set that may be on but not closely watched. One significant result is a

characteristic narrative structure that does not require our full and continuing attention; we may, for instance, watch segments of a weekly situation comedy in random order, or we may understand that we can watch a few minutes of the *Tonight* show without being confused as to the shape of the whole; and, as Altman says, "*Dallas* does not expect to subordinate all our attention to the linearity, directionality, and teleology of a goal-oriented plot. Instead, it recognizes from the start our desire to choose the objects of our attention on other grounds as well"—those grounds being our individual interest in specific characters or sub-plots (44-5). Children used to the flow of TV might well have trouble giving certain kinds of novels the close attention they demand and deserve; such children might well need to be taught a different form of attentiveness as they approach written fiction.

That seems particularly true if we consider Altman's assertion that the ultimate message of TV, in constantly offering us messages on the sound track that request our attention to the picture, is "that the TV image is manufactured and broadcast just for me, at precisely the time that I need it" (51). Such a message might well encourage TV-watching children into a misleadingly solipsistic reading of written fiction. Instead of bewailing the shallow egocentricity of the young, we might better understand that TV has taught it to them, and, understanding that, work to find ways of moving them beyond egocentric reading into the less self-centered dividing of attention among a number of different characters required by most serious fiction.

In an essay called "Brief Encounters: Mass Culture and the Evacuation of Sense," Dana Polan suggests another way in which television flow might affect the attitude of TV-watching children towards reading. Polan believes that the mixture of varying kinds of information in the sequential flow of TV makes it similar to experimental art, "which works through an interplay, a kind of montage, of moments that vaguely hint at meanings and moments that disavow posited meanings, engage in contradiction, undercut every sense by a subsequent or coincident non-sense" (182). Polan offers as an example the varying messages and non-messages of the series of interviews and other segments on any given *Tonight* show; he might equally have suggested *Sesame Street*, which also offers isolated bits of meanings with no relationship to each other, and for which the "whole effect of the show comes from the incongruous confrontation of each bit with the other, the ongoing flow that forces each scene to give way to the next" (182). For Polan, "Flow involves the transcendence of meaningful units by a system whose only meaning is the fact of its global non-meaning," and that results in a particular attitude of cynical powerlessness for viewers: "powerlessness is postmodern mass culture now comes from a situation in which the montage of elements calls into question each and every role that one might care to adopt. There is no position except that of alienated cynicism" (183). Whether cynical or not, young TV viewers might have need of special training in coming to grips with written narrative forms that do in fact imply global meaning.

In a third essay, "Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy," Patricia Mellencamp suggests yet another way in which TV viewers may have developed narrative expectations quite at odds with much serious fiction. She says, "Situation comedy, with 'gaps' of performance and discontinuities, use narrative offhandedly. The hermeneutic code is not replete with expectation, not in need of decipherment, not ensnaring us or lying to us" (91). If TV narrative is at odds with our usual fictional expectations in all these central ways, then an inexperienced reader who knows mainly TV narrative will not understand the reader's obligation to decipher, and to enjoy being ensnared and lied to as conventional fictional plots always do.

Other essays in *Studies in Entertainment*, on topics such as the characteristics of TV news, the relationship between femininity and colonization in advertising, and contemporary horror films, have a less immediate relevance for those interested in the culture of childhood—but throughout the book, these commentators offer interesting insights that might well stimulate further thinking about children and literature. Margaret Morse's discussion of the news makes the fascinating point that all the visual images in news broadcasts are symbolic rather than representational—even the actual White House becomes a symbol when used as a backdrop for any story about the presidency. Such a focus on the visual as symbolic rather than representational might well run through all TV programming, and might explain much about what children expect to see when they look at picture books. And in a discussion of romances, Jean Franco suggests how the plots of fiction relate to the plots we impose on life itself—how conventional fictional narratives relate to the societally-engendered narratives about our expectations, our national values, and so on that help to define us; her comment on comic-strip novels intended for Mexican women might well apply to certain kinds of narratives for children: "Often this moral and ending are so arbitrary in relation to the sequence of events that they highlight the arbitrary nature of all narratives, including the master narrative of nationalism with its appeal to rootedness, to place, to community" (135).

Popular culture is too powerful—and often, too enjoyable—to be merely dismissable. It needs our attention, not just as an example of what we disdain, and not just as an example of what we can uncritically immerse ourselves in. If we could persuade ourselves that the objectionable other were less objectionable, perhaps we could find a way of seeing it as less "other"—and then, maybe, we could find ways of helping minds filled with the life history of My Little Ponies to enjoy Walter de la Mare.

REFERENCES

Modleski, Tania, ed. *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986.