

Perry Nodelman

Perry Nodelman teaches children's literature and science fiction at the University of Winnipeg. He is Associate Editor of the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* and has written numerous articles on various aspects of children's literature.

How typical children read typical books

Many of the children's novels grownups admire are unpopular with children; meanwhile, many children enjoy novels grownups consider to be trash. Rather than conclude that grownups understand nothing about excellence in children's literature, we must assume that children simply have bad taste. I think that many of them do, and I suspect that they do at least partly because of the expectations we create in them, at very early ages, about reading—not just about what they should read, but about how and why they should read. We create such expectations unconsciously, simply by providing stories for children and talking about stories with children in ways that imply our own unconsidered assumptions, both about children and about their reading. After exploring the assumptions about their readers implied by two children's novels, one admired by grownups and one liked by children, I will consider how such attitudes are fostered in early childhood.

Every novel contains assumptions about its intended audience. Harlequin Romances, for instance, assume their readers will be deeply interested in the way well-turned-out young ladies do their hair and fall in love in exotic locales. The novels children like frequently imply, not just that their readers have certain characteristics and interests, but also that those readers understand the books they read in a certain way. The popularity of these novels suggests that many children share these assumptions about themselves.

The most important of them is that children are either incapable of understanding subtlety or terminally impatient with it. But popular novels like Paula Danziger's *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* lack subtlety for a specific reason: they have no distinctive detail, apparently on the assumption that their readers dislike such detail. They make little attempt to create the sense that the events they describe take place in a particular place at a

Paula Danziger
*The Cat Ate My
Gymsuit*

particular time to particular people; in fact, quite the opposite happens. In *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, readers find out many things about Marcy Lewis, her family, her appearance, and her attitudes. But interestingly enough, not one of these details is unusual or surprising; none of them separates Marcy from the vast sea of theoretically typical teenage girls we all assume exist somewhere outside our immediate acquaintance in towns we have never visited. It seems that readers who like these books prefer clichés to carefully described experience.

We develop our clichés of the typical by considering only those qualities we believe masses of people share with each other; in doing so, we eliminate all the things that do make people different from each other. Many teenagers have acne; but some have acne and play the flute, and some have acne and cerebral palsy. The odd thing about Marcy Lewis is that she has none of these distinguishing qualities; at least we don't hear of any. Even descriptions of her appearance are carefully controlled, so that while we know nothing of the particular shape of her nose or the particular colour of her eyes, we do know that she is "an adolescent blimp with wire-frame glasses, mousy brown hair, and acne." She is, in other words, a fantasy version of a popular cliché, a person so typical that she lacks reality.

In fact, Marcy is so typical that she is impossible, a paradoxical summation of everybody's clichés about teenagers. She is both fat and flat-chested, an unusual combination of two sorts of typical teenage problems. And she typically hates everything about her life; but she is untypical enough to realize exactly how typical she is: "sometimes I feel guilty being so miserable, but middle-class kids have problems too."

The generalization is suggestive; Marcy assumes that it is typical of her to feel different, that it is, in fact, normal. She also assumes that most grownups don't like untypical behaviour, particularly in teenagers. And in fact, the novel shows us that they don't. Marcy's father tells her, "Just be good and play by the rules and you'll be a much happier person." Her principal drives the point home: "Marcy, the younger generation just doesn't understand they've got to play by the rules." And her mother reinforces it: "It's just that it's safer being like everybody else." It seems that all grownups speak with a single, typical voice.

Marcy's response to all this is, once again, typical: "some people can be different and still be happy." Perhaps they can; but neither Marcy nor her creator (nor, apparently, those who enjoy reading about her) have much patience with people different from themselves. Parents and principals who

live by less "different" values are shown to be idiots, and Marcy despises her other teachers for not acting just like the amazing Ms. Finney, apostle of individuality: "we kept asking the teachers to be more like her, but they made faces and told us to keep quiet." Marcy wants everyone to be "different" in exactly the same way, and *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* promotes differentness by assuming that people ought to be exactly like each other. It replaces both reality and individuality with typicality, and describes a world in which absolutely everybody is "normal" enough to do exactly what normal people normally do.

Paula Fox
The Slave Dancer

The novels for children which grownups like, and many children are impatient with, rarely dwell so completely on the typical. Consider the opening of Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer*, an award-winning novel admired by many grownups:

In a hinged wooden box upon the top of which was carved a winged fish, my mother kept the tools of her trade. Sometimes I touched a sewing needle with my finger and reflected how such a small object, so nearly weightless, could keep our little family from the poorhouse and provide us with enough food to sustain life—although there were times when we were barely sustained.

Jessie Bollier, who speaks these words, is thirteen, just as Marcy Lewis is. But the circumstances of his life are decidedly unusual. He is poor, and he lives in a time different from our own in a place quite different from the places most teenagers live in. Furthermore, he sees things in his own distinct way. He notices and reports details, like the winged fish on the wooden box, and he has both a highly developed sense of paradox and a highly unusual ability to express it, as evidenced by his playing with the ideas of weightlessness and sustenance.

In fact, the thrust of *The Slave Dancer* is to make readers conscious of how the events it describes are, exactly, *not* typical. Jessie has the decidedly unusual job of "dancing" slaves on their trip across the Atlantic, and he is constantly becoming conscious of how unusual his experience is. "There was no getting used to it for me," he says. "Living the ordinary life of an eating and sleeping creature but on a thing that always moved. . . ." Or, as he thinks of the ship's crew, "They had all come from somewhere, after all. It made no difference to me. . . . We were all locked into *The Moonlight* as the ship herself was locked into the sea. Everything was wrong." Jessie's growing consciousness of the specifics of that wrongness is the subject of the novel.

A consideration of the difference between *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* and *The*

Slave Dancer might suggest that Paula Fox is, simply, a better writer than Paula Danziger—that good writers always make us conscious of the special atmosphere of the places and events they describe, and that Paula Danziger tells us so little that is distinct either because she does not perceive distinctions or because she is not capable of describing them. But in fact, the typicality of *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* appears to be quite deliberate, a way of encouraging a particular relationship between Marcy Lewis and those who read about her that is quite unlike the relationship Paula Fox demands between Jessie Bollier and those who read about him.

Since Jessie's life is so different from our own, we are forced to stand at some distance from him. The novel demands that of us, even in requiring our interest in the detailed operations of a business venture most of us know only vaguely. Furthermore, it requires us to stand back from Jessie and understand who he is simply because we know enough about him to know that he is not like ourselves. But in carefully avoiding distinguishing details, *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* prevents our consciousness of otherness. In fact, we cannot possibly understand the story unless we fill in its exceedingly vague outlines with knowledge from our own experience. Marcy Lewis has no life unless we give it to her; her town and her school have no physical substance unless we provide it. The book demands, not distance, but involvement.

In other words, one can only enjoy *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* by "identifying" with it, or "relating" to it. While those who usually use these words use them vaguely, they imply a close relationship between a reader and a character. "I could really identify with Marcy's fat problem," a fat teenager might say; or, "My principal is strict too; I can relate to that." In other words, one "relates" or "identifies" when one perceives oneself in the characters or situations one reads about. And that can happen to a sizeable body of readers only when characters are described vaguely enough to lack distinctness. The less realistically a character is described, the more typical that character can be; and the more typical a character is, the more readers can see similarities between that character and themselves.

According to a *Horn Book* review of *The Slave Dancer* quoted on the cover of the Laurel Leaf edition, "Jessie is a fully realized figure, whose perceptions and agonies are presented in depth." This amounts to a warning to young readers; Jessie is too complex a character to be identified with, and readers must be prepared to think of him as someone distinct from themselves before they can enjoy reading about him. He is a person they might meet anywhere but in a mirror. That *The Slave Dancer* should be praised for this quality speaks of the prejudices of most grownup critics

and an increasingly smaller number of children. We like books about people different from ourselves set in places described carefully enough to be clearly different from our own. We admire fantasies and historical novels more than we admire novels set vaguely in the present, not, I think, simply as a matter of taste, but because such novels inevitably describe places different from the ones we feel most familiar with; when we admire contemporary novels, we do so because we have been made to believe in the specific uniqueness of the things they describe.

Paula Danziger seems to assume, with some justice, that children read and will like books about people much like themselves set in worlds much like their own. *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* proceeds on the assumption that children read looking for information about themselves—for something to identify with. When Jessie Bollier begins his story by drawing our attention to a specific sewing cabinet, our only choice is to be interested or to be bored; when Marcy Lewis begins her story with her brutally typical assertion, "I hate my father. I hate school. I hate being fat," our only choice is to identify or to be bored.

The important question is, why do so many children demand identification with the characters they read about? A distressing answer to that question is that we work hard at teaching them to do it.

Learning how to read is not just learning what sounds the symbols represent. In continually offering children the same kind of story, we necessarily suggest that all stories ought to be that way. In offering young children story after story which demands identification, we teach them that one understands stories precisely by identifying. When Fuzzy Fred or Fuzzy Harold or Fuzzy Matilda learns, through bitter and comical experience, that good little animals should trust their mothers and stay safely at home, the children who read about them have no choice but to put themselves in the position of Fuzzy Fred or Fuzzy Harold or Fuzzy Matilda. Given my personal experience of children, I doubt that such stories actually teach good behaviour; but they do seem to persuade children that all stories actually are or ought to be about themselves, and that reading is primarily a matter of self-recognition.

Not surprisingly, the stories for young children grownups admire usually put some distance between their characters and their readers. Even a simple book like Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* demands that its readers stand back from the "great green room" it depicts in order to find the specific objects in the room the text mentions; few readers of any age care much about the young rabbit whose presence in the room is dwarfed

Pat Hutchins
Rosie's Walk

by the vibrancy of the objects surrounding him. Similarly, no-one could enjoy the delightful joke of Pat Hutchins' *Rosie's Walk* if he identified with Rosie. Rosie does not see the fox who keeps almost catching her; but people who read the book do, and in so doing, find themselves at some distance from Rosie, wiser than she and enjoying their superior wisdom. They also find themselves at some distance from the fox, who is too stupid to be identified with. In fact, the pictures in any good illustrated book capture the atmosphere of the world they create so specifically that enjoyment of them inevitably depends on our consciousness of the peculiarities of the atmosphere.

Ironically, young children are capable of responding to such stories without identifying with their main characters; my own four-year-old son tells me that stories take place in "another world," a world clearly unlike his own that he enjoys hearing news of. Unfortunately, many children lose their capability for such enjoyment. I think that happens mainly because grownups insist on identification even when stories do not demand it, because they point out how Rosie the hen or the rabbit in *Goodnight Moon* are really like the children hearing about them, and how they ought to be wary of evil strangers or how they ought to go to sleep quickly—just like Rosie or the rabbit. For children who learn to respond to stories in this way, stories which make identification difficult finally become boring and irrelevant.

Why, then, do we insist on teaching children something so obviously limiting? Simply, I guess, because we think it useful for us to do so. If we can teach children to see themselves in the characters they read about, then we can make things happen to those characters that will teach children important truths about themselves. Our conviction that the main purpose of fiction is education causes us to turn fiction into propaganda; as Marcy Lewis insists toward the end of *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, "I think I'm learning a lot." Not surprisingly, Paula Danziger's publishers tell us that she is "currently studying bibliotherapy"; *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* is the archetypical bibliotherapeutic novel.

The assumption of such novels is that identification leads to manipulation. If you see yourself as Fuzzy Harold, then you will learn never to run away from home, just as Fuzzy Harold does. If you see yourself as Marcy Lewis, then you will develop a good image of yourself, just as Marcy eventually does. If you were like her in the first place, and it happens to her, then it can happen to you, too.

That is the theory; but it is, of course, a deception that bibliotherapists

perpetrate upon themselves. For novels like *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* are not therapeutic at all, except insofar as they are designed to make their readers feel good. But they cannot possibly make their readers learn to accept reality, since they contain no reality. On the other hand, they do act as wish-fulfillments; they present the world as some grownups imagine young people would like it to be.

Even to begin with, *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* confirms the usual teenage prejudices about the world that grownups assume to be typical. Marcy is fat and ugly, but she is much smarter and much more sensitive than any of her parents or her teachers. She does not just imagine that her father has no time for her; he actually says, "I've worked hard all day for this family. . . . I don't have to talk to all of you too, do I?" She does not just imagine that her principal is stupid and reactionary; he is. She does not just imagine that her teachers are insensitive and lazy, and give only multiple-guess tests "because they're easier to correct"; they are, except, of course, for the marvellous Ms. Finney, the novel's superheroine. In other words, the book describes, not things as they are, but things as grownups imagine teenagers think they are. That is what readers are meant to identify with.

One might expect an adjustment to a saner and less self-indulgent reading of the world. And not surprisingly, after the identification comes the manipulation. Things happen to Marcy that change her. But ironically, none of them moves her any closer to a convincing reading of reality. Each of them simply fulfills a self-satisfying fantasy.

Marcy discovers that, even though she is fat, she is still desirable; and as soon as she stops feeling sorry for herself, she finds the love of a terrific guy. She becomes a leader after years of being a follower; in fact, a high school student tells her, "Wish we had more excitement at that stupid high school. Maybe it'll get more interesting next year, when you get there." Her mother becomes a better person by adopting her daughter's values and rejecting all her own old ones: "so now, at my age, I'm learning, and you're my teacher." Above all, Marcy meets exactly the kind of grownup teenagers are supposed to wish all grownups were—one who cares for her deeply as a person, admires her intelligence and her sensitivity, and never does anything to suggest that Marcy, at age thirteen, is anything other than absolutely right and absolutely wise about everything there is to know in the whole world.

That grownup is the marvellous Ms. Finney. She is young, dedicated, and perfect. She makes learning fun (mostly by never teaching anything except how to be yourself.) She never yells at anybody, ever. She is capable of

making every single thirteen-year-old in her class adore her, and become a sensitive genius, and always do his homework; every single one. She is, of course, not appreciated by the more ordinary grownups she works with, who try to get rid of her and her guitar and her sensitivity group. But her divinity is spectacularly confirmed when the School Board is forced to reinstate her, despite their obtuse dislike of her. Finally, she moves on to even greater heights, and resigns her job so she can "get a doctorate in something called bibliotherapy," obviously a perfect calling for a perfect human being. And at the end, Marcy dedicates herself to the faith, saying, "That sounds good. Maybe someday I'll do something like that."

This is hardly therapeutic in the clinical sense; while the book claims to show Marcy adjusting wisely to reality, it actually shows her moving off into a weird wish-fulfilling fantasy of a decidedly unrealistic sort—a world where one always gets what one wants, where one is always right about the inadequacies of others, and where one's consciousness of a problem automatically leads to its solution. It is not surprising that young people like such novels, just as it is not surprising that they like Superman or Nancy Drew, which depict reality in the same way; what is amazing is that grownups take the therapeutic value of these books seriously.

Books like *The Slave Dancer* have more chance to be "therapeutic," simply because they have no therapeutic intentions. Therapy depends on identification, and identification on typicality. What books like *The Slave Dancer* teach, simply in describing people so different from ourselves and worlds so different from our own, is the limits of self-indulgence and solipsism. They force a reader's attention away from himself; in enjoying something clearly different from what he is already familiar with, he comes to understand that he shares a world with other people, that simply because that is true things are not always as he would like them to be, and that other people are as interesting in their way as he is himself in his. A reader may not like *The Slave Dancer*, but he can come to that conclusion only by becoming conscious of what is unique about it.

In training children to identify, to read only about themselves, we sentence them to the solitude of their own consciousness. Less significantly but just as sadly, we deprive them of the pleasures of genuinely admirable fiction—the ability of carefully chosen words to evoke experiences we have never experienced and to show us lives we have never lived. The more we teach children to read about themselves, the smaller will be the audience for writing about people different from ourselves—and good writing, whether for children or for grownups, is never about anything else.

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