

Editor's Comment: Is democracy good for literary criticism?

The question occurred to me as I thought about some negative responses to my own opinions on a number of topics that have appeared in recent *Quarterlies*. I was glad to publish those disagreements with myself, for I believe this journal should be a forum for a variety of approaches to children's literature, not just a one-sided representation of my own approach. But as I considered these responses to my work, I was surprised by the common thread that runs through them.

A number of people are upset with the ChLA canon, a project I think important, because our mere act of choosing some books as the most significant ones smacks of elitism—an aristocratic insistence that our own taste is good taste, and that what we like is what everybody ought to like. And in her comments on last year's ChLA conference in the last *Quarterly*, Diana Kelly-Byrne makes a similar criticism of the assumption underlying my discussion of reading strategies, printed in this issue, that some ways of reading a work of literature are better than other ways; she implies that this, too, is elitist.

The logic behind these ideas seems to be something like this: as citizens of democracies, we have the faith that all men are created equal. Well, no, that's elitist too—let's put it another way: all people are created equal. And we know that all books are written by people, and read by people. As the products of equal people, therefore, all books must be created equal; and also all readers, so that any statement that one book is better than another book or that one way of reading is better than another is anti-democratic. Nodelman is not only a snob; his opinions threaten the very bulwarks of the North American way of life.

But surely a belief in democracy does not require us to admire all books equally, nor to refuse to admit to our tastes in the name of tolerance. In fact, I suspect, it requires us to do just the opposite. The supposedly democratic argument that attacks declarations of value as elitist contradicts itself, for it insists that, because everyone is entitled to his or her own tastes or opinions or methods, nobody is entitled to them: that we all have the right to our prejudices, but that because we all do have that right, the exercising of it is a denial of the rights of others.

Paradoxically, then, the trouble with things like the ChLA list of worthwhile children's books is not so much that they express opinions—even the ChLA canon committee has a democratic right to its opinions; the trouble is that in producing the list, the committee implies that its opinions matter—that they may even be right, and that therefore, other opinions may be wrong. It would be okay for ChLA to present a list of worthwhile books or for Nodelman to describe a worthwhile reading strategy, but only if ChLA or Nodelman had the democratic humility to preface their opinions with a remark to the effect that of course, these are just opinions, and just the opinions of people who are only people, after all, and therefore equal to other people, and that other people are entitled to their opinions also, of course, and that therefore, other people probably should stick by their own guns, for it would be undemocratic for them actually to be swayed by somebody's else's opinions, no matter how logically those opinions might be argued. In other words, the only truly democratic way of expressing an opinion is to insist that nobody should pay any attention to it.

I am agonizingly familiar with this line of argument; I hear it all the time from students upset that they have, as requested, expressed their opinions on a test or essay, and then been given a failing grade. How, they ask, if we are all entitled to our opinions, can I fail them for theirs? I have two answers to that. The first is only partly facetious: if they are entitled to their

opinions, I am entitled to mine, and my opinion is that their opinions are not good ones. The second is not facetious at all: their opinions are not good ones because in fact they are not opinions at all. I have failed them, not because they believe something that I do not believe, but because they haven't presented the arguments that might persuade me to share their beliefs. I don't demand that they *do* persuade me—only that they try. Because they have merely asserted their beliefs rather than having attempted to show their reasonability, they have expressed, not opinions, but merely prejudices.

I suppose we are all entitled to our prejudices. But I happily express the opinion that unconsidered prejudices are dangerous: they allow one to act without thinking, and thoughtless acts are often dangerous both to other people and to oneself. To proclaim one's democratic rights as an excuse for neither thinking through one's own opinions nor considering the opinions of others seems to me to subvert the very principles of democracy.

To my mind, the ChLA list of worthwhile books represents opinions rather than prejudice. A number of people with the professional responsibility of thinking deeply and responsibly on the subject of children's literature, have, after much soul-searching argument, arrived at a list that they believe represents excellence in children's literature—a list that ought to stimulate discussion rather than close it off, for no thoughtful person truly convinced of his democratic right to an opinion would accept such a list without careful consideration. To call it elitist is to misunderstand democracy.

The question about the relative value of reading strategies raises an issue of even more particular significance for people involved with children and their literature. To suggest that all reading strategies are equally defensible because the people who use them are equally human, or, as some people do, to say that the good literature for children is the literature most children enjoy most, is not so much anti-elitist as it is anti-educational.

As educators, we must acknowledge that our profession is inherently elitist. Our goal is to change people—to make them different from what they are already, by teaching them more than they know already. I suppose we could claim that teaching people more than they already know doesn't really change them—that they are still basically the same people, only with more knowledge. But of course that isn't true: people who know more approach life in ways significantly different from those who know less. We may well dislike the implications of that; we may believe that children or students have the right to be who they are already simply because they are already equally people. But the more we believe in the sanctity of what they are already, the less we will be able to teach them. A good teacher must acknowledge that true learning is always destructive—and destructive not just of ignorance, but also of ways of seeing and being that become impossible in the light of new knowledge; destructive, in other words, of aspects of individual personalities. But a good teacher believes the destruction is worth it, a necessary sacrifice, a loss balanced by what is gained. Good teaching makes two anti-democratic assumptions: one, students are inferior to teachers in that they know less; and two: it will be good for them to know more, that is, to become more like the teacher.

I happily admit that I make those anti-democratic assumptions myself, in my critical writing, in my teaching, and in my dealings with my own children. I try to educate others in my methods of thinking and even in my opinions and values. I believe they are good methods and good values, especially because they put a

large premium upon careful consideration and resistance to unconsidered prejudice; I've arrived at them only after much consideration myself, I've found them useful, and I believe in their significance enough to wish to share them with others. In other words, I act in the faith that I do know better than others—a faith I must have if I wish to be a successful educator, or critic, or even parent.

Education, and literary criticism, and even parenting, are elitist and anti-democratic; but educators or critics or parents who face up to their elitist responsibilities do far more good than harm, and educators or critics or parents who so much trust the sanctity of others that they refuse to teach anything at all do incalculable harm. We'd all be better educators and critics and parents if we stopped pretending that all ideas are equally valid and all people equally right. Democracy is good for literary criticism—but only if we understand democracy to mean the obligation to defend our opinions rather than the right of others to maintain their prejudices.

Beginning with this issue, the *Quarterly* has two new Assistant Editors. I'm happy to announce that Anthony Manna of Kent State University and James Gellert of Lakehead University have agreed to share some of my editorial duties. Tony will be in charge of the *Quarterly's* columns, and readers can look forward to having these appear on a more regular basis than in the past. Jim will be editing copy, and I warn would-be contributors that before I asked him to do it I made sure that he shared my distaste for scholarly jargon and excessive footnoting. And passives. Passives are hated by me. And yes, that's a prejudice, not an opinion; if we're all entitled to our opinions, then surely I'm entitled to just one little prejudice?

Perry Nodelman