

literary theory and children's literature

Edited by Perry Nodelman

Children's Literature as Women's Writing

by Perry Nodelman

When I was an undergraduate student of English, not all that many years ago, critical theory was something we looked at in our final year, as a minor sideshow of interesting freaks on the periphery of the center-ring business of actually studying literature. The course I took was called "History of Criticism," for the essays we read were more important as history than as theory—for having once mattered than for any theoretical significance they might still actually have. We knew with absolute certainty that in our time scholars had arrived at the best, indeed, the only way to read and understand literature, and we simply took it for granted that we should read in a certain way. In our state of perfect understanding, we had no need of theory.

In the past fifteen or twenty years, things have changed substantially. The exciting developments in theory that have emerged from structuralist and post-structuralist thought have significantly altered the way we look at literature. The discipline as a whole has been in a yeasty state of productive turmoil as it has worked to accommodate these developments in theory into the reading of every conceivable kind of literature. Theoretical questions are a central concern not just for graduate students, who are as likely to specialize in theory as they are in Shakespeare, but also in many introductory courses in literature. The appearance last year of *Reading Texts: Reading, Responding, Writing*, edited by Kathleen McCormick, Gary Waller and Linda Flower signals the popularization of what was once caviar even to the general run of English professors. The book, which is intended for introductory literary courses, recommends reader-response, semiotic, and cultural approaches. Another indication of the popularity of theory is the number of sessions dealing with theory at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association; the program normally contains at least twice as many listings of sessions dealing with theory as it does of any other area of literary studies. Theory is no longer just a minor aspect of literary history—it is the central focus of contemporary literary study.

Scholars of children's literature have special reasons to be grateful for that. Theories like reader-response and feminist criticism, semiotics, and deconstruction have pointed out the repressive limitations of the traditional ways of assigning literary value that were once considered absolute, and that excluded children's literature from any curriculum of literary study that wished to be taken seriously. As an undergraduate I could take only that one small course in the History of Criticism, but there were none at all in children's literature; the mere idea of such a course would have made me and any other serious literary scholar laugh, just as would have courses in Science Fiction or Women's Literature or Media Studies. However the more traditionally-minded among us may feel about these new ways of thinking about literature, nobody can deny that they have helped to open the doors of English departments to children's

literature courses, and created an environment in which the serious study of children's literature is both possible and respectable.

Furthermore, that study would not be so serious without reference to some of these newer approaches to literature. The sort of "New Criticism" that represented the end of the evolutionary trail in my undergraduate days, and that focussed the endeavor of literary scholarship on the act of engendering interpretations—of finding the subtle meanings buried in texts—tends to make the study of children's literature seem silly and more than a little superfluous. If books written for ten-year-olds, or even two-year-olds, actually need to be interpreted by adult scholars who possess the subtle analytical skills developed only after years of thought and training, then what on earth are ten-year-olds or two year-olds without Ph.D.s supposed to make of them? And adult scholars can hardly take pride in arriving after deep and concentrated thought at the meaning of a book written with the idea that it would offer pleasure and instruction to an inexperienced ten-year-old. In fact, even when it has pretended to be New Criticism, the discussion of children's literature has always taken into account the relationship of specific books to general cultural patterns of ideas about childhood (now the subject of semiotic approaches), the role of young readers in the reception of texts (as in reception theory), the relationship of a young reader's repertoire to the repertoire demanded by a text (to use the fashionable jargon of reader-response criticism). Because of the peculiar nature of the object of their study, children's literature specialists discussed literature in terms of its supposed effects on audiences long before there were bodies of feminist or neo-Marxist criticism to justify that procedure. But the newer sorts of critical theory offer a sophisticated framework for such considerations; they focus intensely on the relationships of text and reader, and place literary texts in a context of societal, cultural and literary assumptions that not only makes the study of children's books a thoroughly respectable intellectual activity, but also, opens that study up to a number of fascinating and revealing possibilities.

Nevertheless, recent critical theory has had surprisingly little direct impact on the study of children's literature. There have been special sessions at MLA conferences that have explored the possible relationships between structuralism and children's literature, narrative theory and children's literature, canon formation and children's literature; and there has been some attempt by individual critics to take developments in critical theory into account—provocative work by Jack Zipes, Peter Hunt, and Nancy Huse springs most immediately to mind. But as yet, North American specialists in children's literature have tended to be content with their New Critical or Northrop Fryeian presuppositions, and have explored only a small part of the vast amount that recent theory has to offer for a deeper understanding of the nature and uses of children's literature.

This column, which will appear twice a year in the *Quarterly*, is meant to encourage further exploration by discussing works of literary theory in terms of how they might offer insight into children's literature.

Feminist criticism is not a new approach to children's literature. In its most basic and least persuasive form, the consideration of stereotyped gender roles in relation to the effect they might have on young readers, it has become a staple of the field. Even the most ingenuous of beginning students in introductory courses in children's literature knows for sure that one of the things all responsible adults have an obligation to do is to consider children's books in terms of whether they are guilty of encouraging traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity. Such an approach might well raise our consciousness about previously hidden assumptions; unfortunately, the people who most firmly espouse it usually imagine a perverse utopia in which the men will do all the vacuuming while the women drive all the trucks. This same logic would have us believe that all Jews are free with their money and that there has never been a black who was good at doing the Varsity Drag.

But as a stimulating anthology of articles edited by Elaine Showalter and called *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature & Theory* reveals, feminist criticism has moved far beyond such simplistic assumptions, and has become a subtle and impressively persuasive way of thinking about literature. Of all the newer kinds of discussion of literature, feminist criticism is both the most accessible and the most thoroughly and unsettlingly revolutionary. In surfacing assumptions that are not only implied unconsciously by literary texts but also held unconsciously by many readers who are embarrassed to discover the enormity of what they have taken for granted, the critics represented in this collection of essays demand a rethinking of many of our basic assumptions about both literature and reading. I strongly urge anyone still waiting to be unsettled by the far-reaching implications of feminist criticism to read this remarkable book.

Meanwhile, I'm glad to report that some of the rethinking that feminist approaches might require specifically of specialists in children's literature has already begun in this journal, specifically in the Winter 1982 special section on "Feminist Criticism and the Study of Children's Literature." The articles in that special section moved well beyond a consideration of gender stereotyping. In her article, Carol Gay referred to the division made by Elaine Showalter (in an essay now reprinted in *The New Feminist Criticism*) between two modes of feminist criticism: "the 'feminist critique,' that concentrates on the woman as reader, and 'gynocritics,' which addresses the problem of the woman as writer" (21). Much of the special section focussed on gynocritics in relation to children's literature; the contributors offered valuable readings of a number of children's books in the light of theoretical work by critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Annette Kolodny, Nina Auerbach, Nina Baym, and Elaine Showalter—all of whom are represented in *The New Feminist Criticism*. For those who seek a deeper understanding of the connections between feminist criticism and children's literature, I particularly recommend the pieces in this special section by Elizabeth Francis, Anita Moss, and Carol Gay.

The children's books discussed in the *Quarterly* special section are by Kate Greenaway, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Louisa May Alcott, Katherine Paterson, Eleanor Cameron, and Virginia Hamilton. Not surprisingly, these authors are all

women; "gynocritics," as Showalter says, focuses on "the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women" (248). But at the same time, various of the writers in the special section speak as if their discussions referred to children's literature in general. For instance, Elizabeth Francis says that she is talking about "women writers for children," but when she asks about the prevalence of the images that Gilbert and Gubar find predominating in women's writing, she might well be referring to children's books in general: "To what extent do children's books turn on and deliberately address images of enclosure, whiteness, doubling, mirroring, disease, the angelic, monstrosity, or other euphemisms for repression?" (8) Furthermore, a number of writers in the special section insist on a significant connection between femininity and children's literature in general. Carol Gay says that "women's writing is frequently done for children or young people, both boys and girls, and . . . women as teachers, writers, and mothers are primary transmitters of cultural values . . ." (22); and Anita Moss says in her introduction to the special section that "women writers, women teachers and librarians, and women critics still predominate in the field of children's literature" (3). Indeed, lurking behind these articles but never quite baldly expressed is the intriguing idea that children's literature as a whole is actually a kind of women's writing.

As Moss and Gay suggest, children's literature is most certainly primarily an activity of women. Most writing and editing of children's books is done by women, most children's librarians are women, and most scholars of children's literature are women; indeed, there are times at children's literature conferences when I cannot decide if the treatment I am getting is what sultans expect in harems or merely an exact replication of what it was like when I was a little boy surrounded by a roomful of my many aunts, who were more intent on their gossip about bargains and illnesses than they were on me. Furthermore, and as a clear sign of the continuing ghettoization of matters relating to the care of children, the vast majority of university students who choose to take my courses in children's literature are women. As Elizabeth Segal suggests in her article in the *Quarterly* special section, it is even unfortunately true that most of the children who read children's literature are female.

But one further fact strikes me as being particularly significant (perhaps, you might say, it does so merely because I am male and embarrassed by the femininity of my chosen field, and so assume that de-female-izing its femininity will make it more respectable? Perhaps. I hope not). The fact is this: children's books that have been written by males have more in common with other children's books than with other sorts of writing by men. Assuming that children's literature does possess generic characteristics, and that those generic characteristics have developed through works written primarily by women and in relation to traditionally female matters such as the care and education of children, then children's literature might well have much in common with the specific characteristics of women's writing. Children's literature as a genre might be a sort of feminine literature which shares generic characteristics with writing for adults by women.

If it does, then feminist criticism may have much to offer specialists in children's literature in terms of an overall understanding of the characteristics of the genre as a whole. The various ideas suggested by the writers in the *Quarterly* special

section in relation to texts by women about girls might be expanded into a consideration of children's literature as a genre. That they might well be is supported by the fact that the images Gilbert and Gubar list are common in children's books, books not just by Louisa May Alcott and Virginia Hamilton, but also ones by Robert Louis Stevenson and Maurice Sendak.

As various critics represented in *The New Feminist Criticism* reveal, the peculiar characteristics of writing by women turn out to be responses to writing (and living) in a situation of repression. To be a female writer is to be conscious of the freakishness of the very act of writing (much is made of traditional images of pens as penises, of blank paper as the female body), so that feminine writing is very much a response to a male-dominated world. In *The New Feminist Criticism*, Nancy Miller suggests that "the repressed content" of women's writing is "an impulse to power: a fantasy of power that would revise the social grammar in which women are never defined as subjects" (348); while such fantasies also govern men's writing, there is a significant difference: "I am talking, of course, about the power of the weak."

Not surprisingly, the female critics writing in the *Quarterly* special section about female characters in children's novels by women end up by describing the children's books they discuss either as tales of repression or as wish-fulfillment fantasies of escapes from repression. But in fact, these are common characteristics of all children's literature, whether by men or by women. Children's literature focuses on the lives of people (or animals) without power; children both male or female who must cope with a hierarchy that places them at the bottom. Furthermore, children's books characteristically reveal the power of the weak: powerful aggressors, defined as villains, usually lose to small pacifists. As writing that tries to present a child-like viewpoint, children's literature easily fits the category defined by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in *The New Feminist Criticism*:

What we here have been calling (the) female aesthetic turns out to be a specialized name for any practices available to those groups—nations, genders, sexualities, races, classes—all social practices which wish to criticize, to differentiate from, to overturn the dominant forms of knowing and understanding with which they are saturated. (285)

But all this implies that children's literature, like women's literature, is merely a response to repression—a literature whose specific sort of femininity depends on the existence of a powerful and autocratic masculinist hegemony. As various critics represented in *The New Feminist Criticism* suggest, it is possible to be more positive, to go one step further, and to see the distinctly characteristic aspects of women's writing not as a response to repression, but rather, as a different vision, an alternative way of describing reality. French feminists like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray have explored the possibility that certain kinds of writing might relate to the very essence of femininity itself—what Duplessis calls the "female aesthetic"—"will produce artworks that incorporate contradiction and nonlinear movement into the heart of the text" (278), writing that is "nonhierarchic" (278), "a both/and vision born of shifts, contraries, negations, contradictions, linked to personal vulnerability and need" (276).

At first glance, children's literature is far too conventional, that is, far too much an expression of traditional masculine structures that focus on linearity, order and such, to be consid-

ered feminine in this way. But even as it does express such things, interesting children's literature is in conflict with itself: as a literature in which repressed people triumph, it implies subversion of the social order, even if the form in which that subversion is expressed remains fairly conventional. Indeed, children's literature often implies an ambivalent combination of convention and defiance of convention, in structure as well as in meaning.

The plots of children's novels are less often straightforward versions of conventional patterns than they are meandering and episodic, often oddly combining comic episodes with serious ones, high drama with atmospheric evocations of mundane happenings; the strange predominance of sequels and series in children's literature also suggests a decidedly nonlinear and uncohesive view of plotting. Furthermore, the structure of children's books often implies an intense ambiguity as to how they should be read: Peter Rabbit is either a child who disobeyed and must be punished, or a rabbit who did what comes naturally and is to be admired. Such contradictory readings are built into the structure of children's stories because children's literature is most often meant both to please children and to teach them; the instruction implies a commitment to conventional adult values that assumes the weak are rightly powerless, but the pleasure emerges from a revelation of the secret power of the weak. A perfect example is the series of books about the monkey Curious George, which seem to those who take their authority as adults seriously to be teaching that childlike curiosity is always dangerous, and that children should therefore do as they are told; but these books actually reveal how much fun it is to get into trouble, and show mischief being rewarded in a variety of ways. Children's literature is, therefore, a literature which is often nonlinear (episodic), often contradictory, and clearly linked in its values to a consciousness of vulnerability and need. It is a feminine literature.

Nevertheless, the very qualities that once allowed traditional critics in an academic world dominated by traditional masculine values to dismiss children's literature as unworthy of serious study do define it as "conventional." It is conventional. It is simple, it is straightforward in style. It more often represents wish-fulfillment fantasy than an attempt to cast a clear eye on things as they "actually" are. Perhaps above all, its stories have happy endings, and they are happy because the weak triumph by becoming less weak. But the very conventionality of children's literature may reinforce its femininity. In *The New Feminist Criticism*, Nina Baym suggests that the basic mythology of American fiction celebrates what she calls a "melodrama of beset manhood":

The myth narrates a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. This promise is the deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammelled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition. Behind this promise is the assurance that individuals come before society, that they exist in some meaningful sense prior to, and apart from, societies in which they happen to find themselves. (71)

Baym goes on to point out that society is then identified with an emasculating responsibility to others, and consequently, with women: in the American fiction we have been taught to

admire (by masculine critics), women are the villains who demand conformity and repress the freedom to be oneself. What this tradition of literature devalues is fiction in which adjustments are made to societal responsibilities—much of it fiction written by women. In children's fiction by both women and men the focus is often on such adjustments: Peter Rabbit has to decide whether he is a rabbit or a civilized child who wears clothes, Sendak's Max must confront and cope with his own wildness, Wendy must decide whether or not to stay in the Neverland with Peter Pan, Grahame's Ratty must decide whether or not he wants to be a good citizen or a wanderer. There is always ambiguity about the presentation of these decisions, but in all cases, society at least *appears* to win over self-expression. Even the most pessimistic (and anti-socially masculine?) of children's writers, Robert Cormier, eventually writes a sequel to his bitter *The Chocolate War* that implies a happy ending involving adjustment to society. And in the *Quarterly* special section, Anita Moss discusses Virginia Hamilton's *M.C. Higgins* in terms which imply that his acceptance of societal responsibility is an adjustment to feminine values:

After he encounters New Woman, Lurhetta Outlaw, and the matriarchal values on Kilburn mound, M.C. acquires a more balanced and integrated sense of self. He seems content to make home safe for every member through his humble act of building a wall, rather than trying to dominate the entire mountain on his forty-foot pole in the difficult patriarchal role of "M.C. Higgins the Great." (20)

Moss is saying that M.C. achieves an integration of masculinity and femininity—"the wholeness of the 'androgynous self'" (20); but as a person with some intimate knowledge of masculinity, I think I can safely say that she is wrong. M.C.'s masculinity is not so much integrated as it is dissipated. The traditional masculinist critics whom Baym so accurately describes would see M.C. down from his pole, no longer triumphantly erect and lord over all, as being emasculated, and would view his decision to stay home instead of lighting out for freedom as a sick copout. Like most writing for children, in fact, Hamilton's book clearly and triumphantly expresses a specifically feminine vision—one that works to defy and defeat the traditional masculine values that emerge from repressive conceptions of hierarchy. If the ending of *M.C. Higgins* has positive value, if it is a sane and healthy book, it is so because it views traditional masculinity from within what has traditionally been viewed as a feminine perspective—and rightly finds it lacking: it is no accident that M.C. erect on his pole is actually impotent, unable to do anything but go around in circles—and he learns that even those circles are not caused by his volition, but merely by forces of nature. The novel is less androgynous, less a blending of traditional masculine and feminine values than a healthy act of replacing a clearly deficient, dangerously paternalistic, and traditionally masculine view of individuality with a view of selfhood defined by responsibility and respect that in traditional terms seems weakly effeminate. In terms of traditional assumptions, at least, and like many children's books, *M.C. Higgins* is genuinely and most healthily emasculating.

In her introduction to the *Quarterly* special section, Moss suggests that androgyny might also be a state for critics of children's literature to aspire to: "For both male and female critics in the field, perhaps we can aspire to transcend the narrow categories of gender to attain androgynous being, the

characteristic which Coleridge attributed to truly great minds" (3). Again I must disagree, and for similar reasons: if what M.C. achieves is less androgynous than what has traditionally been defined as feminine, he is merely a representative figure of children's literature; and if children's literature is then basically feminine in its perspective, then it requires an attitude from all its critics, both male and female, that would traditionally be defined as feminine. Such an attitude is just as possible for men as for women, as Annette Kolodny suggests in *The New Feminist Criticism*: "men can, after all, learn to apprehend the meanings encoded in texts by and about women—just as women have learned to become sensitive readers of Shakespeare and Milton, Hemingway and Mailer" (58).

For me, a male reading with a consciousness of feminist criticism and its peculiar combination of respect for a traditionally feminine conventionality and a traditionally masculine tendency to radical anarchy, the central oddity of *M.C. Higgins* is that M.C. must aggressively rebel in what is surely a traditional masculine way against the values of both his parents and his society, in order to achieve his "feminine" triumph; this is not so much androgyny, a blending that transcends or supercedes maleness and femaleness, as it is a paradoxical insistence of two contrary values at the same time. And such paradoxes are at the heart of children's fiction, which is often both revolutionary and conservative, both anarchistic and highly conventional. In this determined insistence on contradiction, children's literature does not so much blend male and female into genderless androgyny as it salvages both masculinity and femininity as traditionally understood, and keeps both intact and in battle with each other within the hearts and minds of characters of both genders. It might even be suggesting the fascinating truth that the continuing and unendable war between so-called masculinity and so-called femininity in each and every one of us, whatever our gender, is the essence of the human condition; perhaps literature as ambivalent as is much good children's writing is the most accurate description of the actual ways things are.

In any case, the femininity of children's literature is not merely a cultural fact, not merely an aspect of our continuing ghettoization of women and of maternal concerns, or of the foisting of responsibility for all aspects of the lives of children on women (with the occasional male expert like myself set up on metaphorical forty-foot poles for all the women at conferences to listen to and be awed and informed by). Femininity is inherent in the structure of children's literature, and it needs further serious consideration, by both toughminded women and sensitive men.

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- Among Perry Nodelman's recent writings is an essay on Joyce Carol Oates's novel Bellefleur, which will appear in a collection of articles on experimental fiction by women to be published by Princeton University Press.*