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editor's comments

Talking About, and Teaching About, Pleasure

The topic for this issue of the *Quarterly*—teaching children's literature both to children and to university students—has attracted more submissions than any other topic in our history. I am delighted by the large amount of interest that reveals, for I believe that our efforts in the criticism of children's literature are pointless unless they show us ways of helping other human beings to a better appreciation of it. As editor of this journal, I've tried to offer a forum for discussions that either reveal important or interesting aspects of the relationships between literature and its readers, or else suggest something important or interesting about a literary text itself that might be taught to readers of any age, including children, and so increase their literary awareness and pleasure. And one of the major thrusts of my own teaching of children's literature is to persuade my students that the appreciation of literature is to a great extent a learned ability—that we cannot expect children to be able to understand and enjoy aspects of literature that we have not taught them *how* to understand and enjoy.

For the most part, the university students I teach happily accept this basic principle, often because they are not themselves avid readers of literature, and are relieved to suppose that their own lack of interest represents inexperience rather than a basic, inherent incapability. For my assertion that literary appreciation is a learned ability often leads them to conclude that they themselves read literature now more or less as they did as children, and indeed, as most children do—and meanwhile, they assume that I (and other English professors) read quite differently. I, like other English professors, am what the jargon of my course allows them to identify as a "sophisticated reader"; and since the aspects of literature that I myself notice and want to discuss are often surprising to them—things they say they never would have noticed on their own—they conclude that they must be *un*sophisticated readers, much like the children we discuss in class. In other words, their own ability to arrive at my kinds of perceptions persuades them that their own kind of reading is what people automatically and naturally do until they come to college and have some smartass intellectual tell them that it's wrong.

Having accepted the smartass intellectual's assertion that literary appreciation is a learned ability, my students work hard to know more about children's literature, so that they can themselves be more effective in teaching children the skills required to appreciate it. Unfortunately, however, the same acceptance of their own lack of experience that allows them to embark so willingly on what is for many an entirely new way of reading and thinking often hampers their ability to learn that new way. For in fact, contrary to their own perceptions of themselves and despite their admitted lack of experience of literature, my students are not actually innocent, unsophisticated readers. Unlike the young children new to reading with whom they so readily identify themselves, most of my students have learned from their previous education how to read literature in a way quite different from both the one research reveals to us as characteristic of young human beings and the one my teaching tends to take for granted. That particularly hampers them, I believe, because the way young human beings read and the way I myself read have more in common with each other than might be supposed—and both are quite different from the way my students tend to read. Unless I can persuade those students that what they do is neither unsophisticated nor necessarily characteristic of young readers, and that what I do is neither necessarily sophisticated or uncharacteristic of young readers, they will continue to approach children with the assumption that the children intuitively share their own learned skills—skills of somewhat questionable utility.

A few months ago, I had a practical demonstration of varieties of literary assumptions in conflict with each other. The various assumptions were those of my students, those of a child, and my own; they came startlingly into focus as the students in my course in Canadian children's literature responded to the child's report of his experience with a particular children's novel—a novel they were themselves studying in the course.

The novel is Jan Truss's *Jasmin* (Douglas and McIntyre, 1984), a book about a young girl from a large and troubled family who decides to run off and live by herself—to "live as she did please," as does the old woman in the Keats poem that young Jasmin so admires. Alone in the bush near her Alberta ranch home, Jasmin learns from the savagery of both animals and weather that the wilds are not a particularly safe alternative to her unsettled home life; but she also experiences a peaceful time for self-investigation, and discovers a talent for sculpture as she molds the clay she finds on a river bank. Having been rescued from a terrible storm by an understanding young couple who admire her newly discovered talent, Jasmin realizes that she must return to face the implications of her life at home—particularly her responsibility for her mentally deficient brother Leroy, whom she learns has wandered off in search of her. Jasmin returns home, then finds and rescues Leroy; her expedition has led others to notice and attempt to assist in her family's problems, and given her new faith in herself and her ability to cope.

The child who came to discuss his reading of *Jasmin* with my class was my son, Joshua Nodelman, a twelve-year-old grade six student. Joshua is certainly no representative child reader. Because his birth happened to coincide with my own entry into the field of children's literature, he has been my prime guinea pig in matters literary throughout his life. I started to read to him when he was eight or nine months old. After five years of constantly being read to, he startlingly announced an ability to read on his own at the age of six—and quite magically could suddenly read just about anything written in the English language.

Since then, I have given him books to read on his own; and we often discuss those books. Joshua has probably heard and read and talked about as much children's literature as any twelve-year-old in the world. His vast reading seems to have had some part in making him a mature, self-confident, responsible, and interesting human being (I say all these flattering things not because I am a proud father but in order to get his permission to write about all this); but with that vast repertoire of children's literature enriching and controlling his responses, he is hardly your typical young reader.

Nevertheless, I believe that Joshua's response to *Jasmin* has more in common with that of other twelve-year-olds than does the sort of reading my university students tend to do—that Joshua's response differs from that of many other children less in terms of what he finds interesting than in his ability to find words to describe his experience. I have no scholarly proof for that, of course—it may merely be something I wish to believe; but I have heard many children struggle inarticulately to describe responses that seem to have much in common with Joshua's, but for which they have no language. Furthermore, and despite my continual attempts to get Joshua to like the books I admire myself, his tastes are probably more like those of most twelve-year-olds than my own; while he will read the books I recommend to please me, his favorite writer is Gordon Korman, the young Canadian creator of exuberantly trashy comic adventures.

This is what Joshua wrote about *Jasmin*, and read to my class:

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT *JASMIN*

I thought that it was a good story. It went on at a good, fast pace, and did not dwell on some things so long that you got bored of it. For instance, chapter fourteen, which is about Leroy, only lasts about two pages but in two pages manages to tell you Leroy's situation. (He had run away to find Jasmin, but it didn't go on for pages and pages about his muddled thoughts—"Where is Jasmin? My head itches," etc.) Even though the book was so compressed, it is quite long, and somehow it always manages to keep you in suspense. The book is very hard to put down once you've read a few chapters. I like the way, when Jasmin ran away, that it was set up so that one chapter centered on Jasmin, the next on her family (and occasionally one on Leroy). Since the chapters are short and condensed, you always have a good idea about what was going on, and what everybody was thinking all the time.

WHAT I DID NOT LIKE ABOUT *JASMIN*

Some of the parts were not believable, for instance, the ending! Jasmin is happy. Jasmin has new friends (lots of them). The boys finally think that she is cute. Leroy speaks. Jasmin gets her own room. Jasmin does not have to carry Leroy around all the time, as a result she gets even more friends, she hears that she can do art (clay animals). The clay animals win second grand prize. Jasmin is happy. I think this is quite overdone. Not so many wonderful things could happen at one time.

When she was in her cave, she thought she heard someone on a motorcycle looking for her, but finds out that it was a spruce goose and thereby assumes that everything is wrong wtih her life, and nobody loves her, and that the whole world is out to get her. I don't believe that she would think so drastically, unless it was because she had been living in a cave for a while.

At the very beginning, she hates herself because she is *flat-chested*. But she is only eleven years old! I go to a class with about seven eleven and twelve year old girls and I am sure that none of them worries about being flat-chested. I think this might work if Jasmin was fourteen or fifteen in the story.

I thought it was weird, when she ran away she was described as being in the woods for about two or three days and then suddenly it was told as being gone six days. It might be said, however, that the unreal aspects helped make it a better story, and that the book was not intended to depict exact reality.

RATING

On a scale of 1 to 5 stars (1 poor-5 excellent).

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(four stars)

THE END

Now as I said, Joshua is not a typical child reader—not only has he read widely, but he has been asked many questions about what he has read, and obviously he has learned a useful way of answering those questions—both a vocabulary that describes aspects of literary response and a way of thinking that uses that vocabulary. But it seems to me that he reveals his fellowship with other child readers in the aspects of the novel that he decided to ask questions about, and even in some of the things he said about them.

Joshua reveals some youthful lack of perception of people he deals with daily in his conviction that the females in his class do not worry about bust development; and despite his broad experience of literature, he nevertheless tends to share with many other young readers the assumption that it is a primary responsibility of fiction to be convincingly realistic. He cannot see why Jasmin would become so totally gloomy, and he wants an ending that is less extremely happy.

Now as a reader with an addiction to fiction and a large experience of it, I personally tend to find the agreement of a book with the reality I already know not terribly significant; like most "sophisticated readers", I assume that fictions, even theoretically realistic ones, always describe alternate realities—and I am more interested in their internal consistency than I am with their accordance with the world outside their pages. Consequently, I will happily accept the sort of inconsistencies Joshua complains about if it seems to me that a book gains something from them—as, I think, *Jasmin* gains some of the melodrama and wish-fulfilling satisfaction of a fairy tale exactly when it sacrifices consistency with reality. Joshua seems to be heading toward a similar opinion when he concludes, "It might be said, however, that the unreal aspects helped make it a better story, and that the book was not intended to depict exact reality"; the wording of this sentence is so technical that I suspect it is a version of something I myself suggested to him in discussion, but I know that further consideration would lead him to a better understanding of both the idea and the novel.

Nevertheless, his paper reveals that Joshua inconsistently both enjoys the nonrealistic aspects of a book and complains about them—as I suspect do many young readers. Perhaps the complaints are evidence less of an actual desire for realism than of his learning from school and elsewhere some conventional attitudes toward literature of the sort of my university students have often learned so well; in his younger years before he went to school and studied Language Arts, Joshua had more tolerance for unreality in fiction.

But I believe that Joshua most reveals his fellowship with other young readers when he says that what he most liked about Jasmin was the way the book involved him—the way in which he became caught up in the events and the characters. What he found it most important to ask himself and attempted to answer were questions about how the author had managed to create that effect on him. His response deals with technical matters like the length and shape of the chapters, not because he has a profound interest in literary technique, but because he had been asked to talk about what he *liked*, and had no way to do so in any detail but to discuss technique—how the book did what he liked it doing.

Most twelve-year-olds—indeed, most human beings—cannot say much about how a book accomplished the effect it had on them. But as Joshua did here, we can all say what we liked about a book; and we seem to enjoy doing so—it is the first response most of us of an age will make if asked to say something about a book. Nevertheless, in the context of an educational system that assumes literature is primarily a teaching device—a way of learning useful information about how to cope with the world and other people—most children learn that what is required of them in a discussion of books has little or nothing to do with what they like. In asking young students to show us what they comprehended about a story or poem, and older ones to discuss its moral or social implications, its "theme" or what my university students call its "hidden meaning," we make it clear to them that, while statements about what one liked or did not like about books are certainly allowable, they are not really discussable. As an aspect of personal taste and freedom of choice, what one likes or dislikes is too sacred to be negotiable; what one discusses is something quite different—what one can learn from a book, not what is likable about it.

The evidence to support the fact that this sort of focus is basic to our usual handling of literature is everywhere. A children's writer once told me how her own child came home from school with a mimeographed form on which to do a book report. One question was, "What was the author's purpose?" The writer jokingly suggested, "To make a few bucks," and then more seriously and more honestly added, "To give readers pleasure." Her own child said, "Aw, come on, Mom, I can't say something like that. You know I'm supposed to say what the book taught me." What the child wrote on the mimeo was what the book taught her; and it doubtless had something to do with her own behavior.

The questions my students asked Joshua after he had delivered his paper to them made obvious their own adherence to the school of literary thought that wants to know the author's purpose. They had nothing to say about his comments on the technical strategems by which the book had enmeshed him in its plot; their questions made it clear that the book could be considered successful only if Joshua claimed to have learned important things from it about his own behavior.

One student asked him point blank what he had learned from Jasmin's experience. Joshua quite honestly said that he couldn't think of anything. The student, obviously surprised and discomfited, asked if Joshua thought he was supposed to learn anything. Joshua said no, he didn't think so, the book was meant to be an interesting adventure. Not satisfied with that, another student asked if there was absolutely nothing that he had learned from the book. Joshua said, well, he supposed that if he wanted to run away, he could get some valuable tips from Jasmin's experience about what to take along and how to live in the woods. This caused some laughter—it was obviously not the expected answer. Another student tried a different approach, and asked Joshua why he thought Jasmin had returned home. Joshua said he didn't see that she had any choice, her adventure was over and after all, home is where people have to live. Under persistent questioning, however, he finally admitted that maybe Jasmin's decision to return to search for her brother represents a new understanding of her own responsibility, and that his own reading about it may have taught him something about responsibility too.

That satisfied my students. What was peculiar about this conversation was that Joshua had finally been forced to admit to learning something that is in fact one of his most noticeable characteristics—a sometimes burdensome sense of responsibility. He could not possibly have learned that from *Jasmin*, for he had known it all along.

But that my students so earnestly desired him to claim such learning is revealing. The questions they asked Joshua are exactly the kinds of questions they have been taught to ask themselves about the books they read. Such questions imply a rather narrow view of what matters in literature. In that view, all fiction is read as if it were fable—as stories designed to surface a moral or social truth in a way that confirms that truth for readers. This sort of reading bypasses discussion of any other aspect of the literary experience—including the basic sources of fictional pleasure, such as adventure and suspense, that Joshua had tried to address in his talk, and that are central to my own and most other "sophisticated" reading and discussion of literature.

Joshua's unwillingness to accept my students' assumption that the book must have taught him something reveals that he has spent enough time discussing literature with an expert, and has enough inherent arrogance, to be not particularly concerned about matters such as the author's "purpose." He wrote about what actually did interest him in *Jasmin*; he did not do what I believe most children quickly learn to do in most of our schools—forget what they really did like about a book and conentrate instead on what they are supposed to say about what they have learned from it.

Joshua's reading of *Jasmin* clearly has its deficiencies. He had, in fact, either ignored or taken for granted anything in the book that might have led to its interpretation as a parable with a message of import to himself—and while not all books try to be parables, *Jasmin* obviously does. Mind you, Joshua's reticence about such matters may merely mean that he did notice them but did not find them interesting, or that they were not what he liked about the book; for once my students asked questions in this area he proved himself quite capable of providing informed answers. But the real oddity of this situation is that my students' mode of reading had neglected the aspects of the book that Joshua dwelled on, while his neglected what they dwelled on. A more sophisticated reading would probably try

to take both aspects of the book into account, and achieve some integration of them.

Yet I discovered when I explored my own notes for this class that what I had myself intended to say about *Jasmin* seemed to cover none of the ground that either Joshua or my students found most important. I had wanted to talk about matters of imagery and structure — about the way the book focused on silences and various kinds of disruptive noises, about the way this focus on noise related to a kind of ongoing exploration of whether the wilderness represents freedom or danger — how every time Jasmin thinks she has figured the world out it reveals another face to her, usually in ironic contradiction to what she has just concluded; and I wanted to consider how the book explores the question of what "home" is by depicting various homes, by unsettling the usual convention that home is a stable place, by paradoxically showing Jasmin running away from a disrupted home and trying to create an orderly one in the wilds. Some of these matters captured my attention in *Jasmin* because my previous reading had trained me to look for them — the idea of home is central to children's literature, and Canadian fiction for both children and adults often considers the ways in which people may be thwarted by the vast forces of nature. Presumably, my interest in such matters has its origin in the kind of questions both Joshua and my students asked; but in my "sophisticated" involvement with literary structure, I had forgotten origins. I had neglected to cover some very basic stuff.

So our various assumptions about reading had led all of us to ignore some important basics. But of us all, I think what my students ignored was missed most. For surely reading is primarily a pleasure; Joshua and I were in our different ways both talking about and exploring what gives us pleasure, while my students' readings implied that pleasure was either insignificant or unexplorable. Unfortunately, most adults do learn to ask of literature only the sorts of questions my students asked Joshua — and as a result, the whole question of the pleasure literature offers is one for which most human beings have no vocabulary, no strategies for thinking or discussing — no choice but to be silent.

The question of pleasure is one that good university teaching usually addresses. In university classrooms, even discussions of the thematic thrust of works of literature tend to be centered on how the fact that a work has certain moral or intellectual implications gives it the sort of unity and coherence that we understand to be a central source of literary pleasure. But in my experience, a surprising number of university students misunderstand the thrust of such discussions. They are so used to interpreting fiction as parables that they assume the focus is on the meaning rather than on the way the meaning gives shape to an experience. It takes much unlearning to persuade young adults that they can indeed enjoy literature, that they can even enjoy discussing what they enjoy about it. Until we broaden our focus in elementary and high school classrooms and find ways of teaching children the language and strategies of thinking that will allow them to consider and discuss the sources of their own pleasure, we will doom young readers to silence on the very aspects of literature that surely are and should be most significant to them.

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