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Articles

FORUM

Pleasure and Genre: Speculations on the Characteristics of Children's Fiction

Perry Nodelman

I like to read children's books. They gave me pleasure as a child, and it was the fact that they continued to give me pleasure as an adult that led me to focus my attention as a literary scholar on them. The assumption I begin with is that my pleasure might be a valuable source of insight. Understanding more about it might help me to determine which qualities make children's books different from others—a distinct kind of writing, a genre.

On the face of it, the children's books that particularly give me pleasure—older texts such as Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit,* Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are,* and E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web,* newer ones such as Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* or the picture books of Chris Raschka or the novels of the Canadian writer Brian Doyle—are quite different from each other. But they do have two things in common. First, they share the characteristics most usually identified with texts written for children, the ones I list in a chapter on this subject in my book *Pleasures of Children's Literature.* At least in comparison to many adult literary texts, they are short, simple, often didactic in intention, and clearly positive in their outlook on life—optimistic, with happy endings. But second, as the extensive critical discussion of many of these texts implies, their apparent simplicity contains depths, often surprisingly pessimistic qualifications of the apparent optimism, dangerously and delightfully counterproductive

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possibilities that oppose and undermine the apparent messages. These texts can be easily and effortlessly heard or read, but once read, they continue to develop significance, importance, complexity, to echo ever outward and inward. These are texts that resonate.

I like them, I believe, *because* they resonate—because they seem so simple and yet allow for so much thought. There's something magical about texts so apparently straightforward being so non-straightforward. I find more obviously complex texts much less magical.

These texts resonate so magically, I think, because they are trying to be optimistic and didactic at once. That's inherently self-contradictory; it leads to ambivalence, subtlety—resonance.

The nature of the contradiction becomes more apparent in a consideration of texts for children that are less obviously ambivalent. Many children's books (books that I tend to enjoy less) are either more purely didactic or more purely optimistic, preachy tomes about trains that stay on the track and teenagers who learn to cope with bullies or wish-fulfillment fantasies about children who defeat evil villains and save the world. Such books represent two opposite ways in which adults like to address children, based, I think, on different ways of thinking about how children differ from adults. The didactic stance implies that children are weak or fallible or somehow mistaken—in need of instruction in how to be better people, that is, more like adults. The wish-fulfillment stance implies that children are not only just fine as they already are but that what they wish for in their childlike, egocentric way is exactly what they need to imagine and ought to be. (I hasten to point out that the wish-fulfillment stance is, in its way, just as didactic as the other. It represents a way in which some adults like to imagine childhood and, I suspect therefore, would like children to imagine themselves. As a result, these books also work to teach children—albeit for a different purpose and in different and more subtle ways.)

These two opposing attitudes float free in our culture and in our minds—two contradictory ways we all tend to think about children, often at the same time. The texts I most enjoy try to do both these things at once. As didactic fables, they want to urge children to stop being childish and learn to be better and different. As wish-fulfillment fantasies, they want children to stay exactly as they so wonderfully are. They happily inform us that Peter Rabbit or Max of the Wild Things matures by being triumphantly wild and childlike, that Anne of Green Gables or Weetzie Bat can grow up without actually changing at all. Their ambivalence results from these pulls in opposite directions.

Nor is the ambivalence about idealizing childhood and condemning its inadequacies the only pull there is. There are others. Consider, for instance, a quality I suggested in *Pleasures* might be characteristic: that many texts for children are focalized specifically through the minds of child characters or begin, at least, by describing a world in ways that writers assume a child might understand. Even third-person narrators tend to speak of little more than what their protagonists can perceive and therefore show us little more than how their protagonists view and understand the world they move through. Usually, that understanding is an innocent one, based on our assumption that children lack the knowledge that comes with experience. But intriguingly, innocence—lack of knowledge—seems inevitably to imply its opposite. It does so, necessarily, differently for young, inexperienced readers than for me—but I think I can make a case that it does so in some way for both inexperienced readers and jaded sophisticates, so that the pleasures I obtain from these books may be not so different from the pleasures experienced by younger readers.

For myself, part of the pleasure of reading children's books comes from knowing more and better than the focalized characters do. I enjoy the opening of *Charlotte's Web* in part because I see through Fern's wonderfully complete ignorance of the world's complexities and of the implications of life on a farm. I know that in ridding the world of injustice, as her father says, she is committing herself to a position that, if followed through logically, would deprive her family of its income and herself of her happiness. I gain a similar pleasure from knowing more than Harriet does about the behavior of the people she spies on in *Harriet the Spy*, and, perhaps in a more sentimental vein, from admiring Anne of Green Gables's blithe ignorance of the ways in which her enthusiastic imaginings might conflict with more conventional adult standards. For me, the innocence of the point of view inevitably implies a wider realm of knowledge that I can compare the innocence with. I can then see with a youthful protagonist and also against that protagonist—and be, therefore, pleasurably pulled in two opposite directions. And in a really good book, I never have to conclude, as I do in overly obvious didactic fables, that ignorance is absolutely dangerous, or else, as I do in overly obvious wish-fulfillment stories, that ignorance is absolute and total bliss. I am left perennially pulled, in a state of wonderfully engaging and, for me, wonderfully pleasurable tension.

By definition, the inexperienced child readers who might more logically be viewed as the intended audience of these texts do not possess such a degree of knowledge and therefore cannot possibly have

the same double relation with a childlike narrative point of view. They might, nevertheless, experience the doubleness, sequentially rather than simultaneously, as they make their way through a children's book.

Almost every children's story that starts by describing its protagonist's childlike point of view seems to come to a triumphant climax at the moment when the child sees past the innocence, acknowledges it as ignorance, and becomes more mature. In both *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *Where the Wild Things Are,* for instance, a movement into a pleasurably self-involved wish-fulfilling fantasy based on a relatively ignorant idea of what is possible leads the child protagonist to a moment of awareness that disperses the fantasy and leads him back to his family, presumably more mature and wiser. Thus, what at first appears merely pleasurably innocent turns out to be dangerously ignorant in relation to a wisdom achieved later. These books allow child readers to enjoy their identification with an innocent point of view only at the expense of being forced eventually to acknowledge its limitations.

And yet, surely, much of the pleasure for a reader resides in the earlier passages that allow the innocent point of view to be indulged. Most children's books end quickly, shortly after the point at which wisdom is gained, for the activities of the wise are simply less interesting to contemplate than those of the unwise.

I might even suggest that the moment at which innocence is transcended might be merely ritualistic—an obligatory but pro forma bow to didacticism placed there only to allow the imagination to be indulged, not really intended to be taken seriously or, even when intended to be so, not always taken seriously by imaginative young readers, who might put up with it simply for the sake of the fun that precedes it. But in fact, I suspect, readers of most ages mirror my own wonderfully ambivalent response—they want to enjoy the pleasures of innocence and want also to be told of the dangers of innocence and see them lead to innocence's demise.

The most pleasurable books for me create exactly that precarious but infinitely sustainable balance. Their climactic moments celebrate maturity but do so in a way that causes me to question the completeness of its wisdom. Consider, for instance, Stevenson's *Treasure Island:* Jim Hawkins assures us at the end that his adventure has taught him to hate adventures, a move that makes him seem like a sour-minded and self-centered boob to readers who have loved to hear about the adventures and also know how rich they have made him. His maturity seems so stupid that it makes his earlier innocence seem wise, so that inno-

cence and wisdom deliciously undermine each other. There remains a pull in opposite directions, between the pleasure of not knowing and the mastery of finding out how much you didn't know.

Furthermore, every child who reads will read the story of innocence joyfully indulged and then sensibly transcended again and again as he or she progresses through childhood. Even if the child does not possess a sophisticated adult's repertoire of wisdom, he or she will quickly learn that the innocence that allows child protagonists their adventures will always in each text come to be seen as limiting ignorance. I suspect, therefore, that many child readers read children's books as I do, in the consciousness of how the pleasure of their innocent point of view might be being balanced and qualified by the pleasures of a deeper knowledge to come and also with a sense that the deeper knowledge, which surfaces only toward the end of the story, is also going to be undercut by the innocent pleasures in the next book.[1]

It's possible, then, that readers of all ages can respond to young protagonists getting into trouble owing to their trust in their own limited wisdom both by enjoying the wonderful chaos and self-indulgence of the trouble and by standing back, realizing how stupidly the characters are behaving, and feeling superior to them. Witness the way many of us respond to Curious George or The Stupids or even Anne of Green Gables, Harriet, Jim Hawkins, or Kevin Henkes's Chrysanthemum. Readers are happy to have a story confirm their own superior wisdom by having George or Anne or Chrysanthemum realize the errors of their ways—and yet, also, offer ways to see through or beyond the imagination-destroying and excitement-controlling limitations of that wisdom, and lust after just one more story about a wonderfully self-indulgent and self-trusting innocent who gets into more delightful trouble so that they can both celebrate the trouble and condemn it.

Why is this double pull so pleasurable? In terms of questions of knowledge in particular, of what we do and don't know as readers, I think it's in part because it's a sort of hiding game—as in some versions of Zen Buddhism, which imagine that the world we call real and the selves we call real within it are all merely various ways in which the infinite presence has hidden itself from itself, so that it—that is, we—can have the pleasure of finding itself—not-we—again. There is no purpose in this but the pleasure of the process. In the books I enjoy, the knowledge that transcends innocence is hidden from the narrator—but hidden in ways that allow astute readers to find it, to know

more than the narrative itself is claiming to tell. And then, the joys of freedom and possibility and innocence that undercut mature knowledge are hidden from a newly wise narration—but hidden in ways that allow astute readers to remember it, to know more than the narrative now theoretically wants us to understand and commit ourselves to. And because the game is double, because innocence undercuts newly achieved wisdom just as much as the wisdom undercuts the innocence it theoretically supersedes, there is really no move forward or backward, no final wisdom to be achieved—no purpose in the game but the pleasure of the never-ending process.

There is, I think, another aspect to the pleasure: the way it allows us to indulge repeatedly in a ritual reenactment of the move from childhood to maturity, innocence to knowledge. In real life, for each of us, that happens only once. But in each book about Curious George, George gets into trouble and learns, in theory, not to be so curious. In almost every chapter of *Anne of Green Gables,* Anne gets into trouble and learns not to be so enthusiastic and unrestrained. And in children's book after children's book, characters get into trouble and learn wisdom from it, only to be superseded by the next character moving beyond innocence in the next book.

There are a number of Jungian interpretations of children's novels that identify various characters as the protagonist's shadow or anima, and describe how the story replicates an individual's move toward psychic integration. Such interpretations usually make the assumption that the fictional representation of this psychic voyage somehow takes readers along the same path, through chaos toward mental health. If they do, though, why would a reader who has gone through the process once and become an integrated whole as a result of it ever again need or want to read a similar book that replicated the experience? The answer might be the pleasure of the repetition. In the reading of children's fiction, the one-directional move from innocence to wisdom, ignorance to knowledge, youth to age and inevitably death is replaced by endless recurrence. Age succeeds youth only to be magically succeeded by youth once more. As we begin to read a children's book, each of us, young or old, can view the world as a child yet again, become, in imagination at least, a child yet again. And also, as we move toward the end of a children's book each of us, old or young, can grow wise and learn more than children know. As long as we continue to read these books, we can be ever again young and innocent, ever again older and wiser.

That ought to be impossible—which suggests another pleasurable aspect of children's books. They tend to deny impossibility. Indeed, I might almost commit myself to the position that the main subject of children's fiction is just that: impossible things happening. Rabbits talk and dress like humans, and spiders spell words in their webs. Forests grow in bedrooms and there are fairies at the bottom of the garden. The impossible happens even when the stories seem to take place in more obviously realistic worlds and are not so clearly fantastic. Young girls survive childhoods full of abuse with their cheerful good spirits intact and convert entire townships to their optimistic ways of perceiving things. Young boys almost single-handedly defeat entire crews of pirates. Other children successfully and even fairly easily survive in the wilds or in concentration camps or find ways of forging friendships with those who have declared undying enmity toward them.

The most important aspect of these impossibilities is that they *are* impossible or at best highly improbable, at least in the world we actually inhabit outside the confines of the texts, and that in the texts they nevertheless do happen. I love it when the world of a fiction allows more, and different, and more interesting possibilities than the world I know I'm actually stuck with.

I know I am not alone in this. A young reader of my fantasy novel *The Same Place but Different* wrote to ask if anything like what the novel describes ever happened to me—if I'd actually ever met any of the Strangers, the pernicious creatures from British fairy lore the novel describes. He suspected it hadn't, but he was hoping, fervently hoping. He wanted, he said, something like that to happen to him.

I don't. Although I love to imagine it happening, I would probably have a heart attack right on the spot if it actually did happen. It would be awful if a Stranger actually strolled into my life, just awful. Unlike my character Johnny Nesbit, I wouldn't know what to do. I'd probably end up whining or hiding in a dark closet until somebody else dealt with the problem and saved me and the rest of the universe. One of the reasons I like books of all sorts is that they allow me to enjoy experiences I would *not* enjoy in reality. All things considered, I think I like reality the way it is, like it enough to accept its occasional boring patches and its awful habit of letting bad things happen to good people. And I think I like impossible fictions because I know always exactly how impossible they are.

But their impossibility is not the only thing I like about them. I know that because I've gone through periods in my life when I've concen-

trated on reading other kinds of impossible fictions, science fiction or fantasy intended for adults, but eventually, always, I stop. I get bored. And I haven't yet got bored enough with children's fiction to stop reading it. So I have to ask why? What's the difference?

The difference reveals a second important aspect of my love of the impossible. I love it best when it happens in the context of a firmly established possible, and when the narrative in which it occurs takes a decidedly matter-of-fact attitude toward it. Thus, I particularly love *Charlotte's Web* because the story of the talking and writing spider emerges fairly seamlessly from a realistic story about life on a farm. I particularly love *Where the Wild Things Are* because an extraordinary forest grows inside a perfectly ordinary bedroom and the narrator doesn't seem at all surprised by it. I particularly love the ways in which the surrealistic details in various picture books by Anthony Browne are utterly unaccounted for—so much a part of the world of the narrative, apparently, that the narrator doesn't need to account for them or even mention them as being especially noteworthy aspects of the scene in front of us.

I do, of course, enjoy fantasies such as Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea books, which take place entirely in an alternate universe and thus deprive me of the pleasure of encountering impossibilities in the midst of a recognizable reality. But I don't enjoy them as much as books that include fantasy elements in real settings—and I tend not to see them as characteristic of children's fiction, which tends more toward Peter Pans and Treasure Seekers than it does to Earthseas.

My taste for the impossible appearing in a context of the familiar seems to be one more version of the knowledge game I talked about earlier. As I said, I like the impossible because I can recognize it as exactly that. So when a narrator matter-of-factly tells me that something impossible has just happened, I know I am being outrageously lied to—but lied to by someone who doesn't seem to know he or she is lying, or if he or she does, is quite fervently unwilling to admit it. Consider this opening sentence of a Grimm tale: "There were once a mouse, a bird, and a sausage that decided to set up housekeeping together."[2] It's wonderful to consider the possible existence of such a strange household; it would be less wonderful if I didn't know the true character of mice, birds, and sausages and therefore imagined that it might actually happen. Meanwhile, however, I'm wrong. In the world of the story, the impossible is not impossible. I know that sausages can't talk, but this particular sausage, the story tells me, just did.

The mouse, the bird, and the sausage are indeed living out their domestic drama before my eyes. I know that of course they can't be. I am reading that of course they are. So here I am again, being pleasurably pulled in two opposite directions by competing forms of knowledge, one based on innocence of the laws of real possibility, one based on an experienced acceptance of them.

It seems clear, then, that questions of competing forms of knowledge are central to children's literature—not all that surprising, since its very existence is predicated on distinguishing children from adults primarily on the basis of their innocence—what they don't yet know. But the pull in two opposite directions appears to be fundamental to all sorts of pleasure. Sexual pleasure tends to consist equally of the pleasure of delayed orgasm and the pleasure of the orgasm itself, so that the overriding pleasure results from the intermingling of the two, the pull between them. Fictional plots often offer a form of exactly this same tension—the pleasurable suspense of delayed knowledge and the pleasurable release of knowledge finally revealed. Will the sausage survive its predatory house mates? I want to know, I need to know, I don't want to know quite yet.

Most fiction, in books, in movies, and on television, offers some form of this tension. But children's fiction offers it in particularly intense forms for one other important reason—and one final source of particular pleasure for me. The children's fiction I most enjoy tends to exprss itself most often in terms of describing meetings and intermingling of things that are seen, by us and by the narrator and the characters, as belonging in different or even opposite categories. This fiction tends to misrepresent the complexities of the world we live in by organizing its spectrum of subtle variations into sets of fairly rigid binary oppositions that intersect in the same place or even within the same character.

In *Pleasures of Children's Literature* I list common binaries that relate to two basic ones—home and away. I suggest that homes tend to represent safety and boredom, places away from home danger and excitement; that homes tend to represent communal connection and suffocation, away individual freedom and isolation, and so on. Here, I'm less concerned with the meanings attached to these binaries than I am with the plots that engender them. The books I most enjoy tend to be about two clearly defined opposites confronting each other. In them, for instance, the present confronts the past, as a character goes back in time. Or perhaps the future meets the present, as characters in chil-

dren's science fiction often confront less technological worlds than the futuristic ones they are used to. Or animal characteristics meet human characteristics in the body of one character. Or the inanimate intersects with the animate in the body of one doll come to life, or small people such as Stuart Little interact with big ones. Or, and in general, fantasy intersects with and exists within the world of reality, as in *Weetzie Bat.*

All these kinds of stories seem to have three common and necessary features.

The first is that there must be clear oppositions. This is not a subtle mixture of past and present, animal and human, good and bad, black and white turned subtly gray. The oppositions are clearly separated out. (This may be one of the reasons that children's literature can be seen as simple—it tends to work in terms of binary oppositions far more obviously than does much serious adult literature.)

The second is that the oppositions do intersect and interact but never actually and finally blend. A wildly luxuriant forest may grow in Max's sparse bedroom, but it's clearly a separate and opposite thing, and it's obviously gone by the time the book ends. The magic is not that two apparently opposite things become one larger, more subtle thing, as might happen in an adult story, but rather that two opposite things have intersected for a time, maybe done a dance with each other, but remained finally separate. There's an interesting scene in Janet Lunn's time fantasy *The Root Cellar* in which a character provides a Thanksgiving dinner by moving into different Thanksgivings across the decades and stealing a dish from each, so that all times intersect in one meal. But then the meal is over, the past recedes into the past, and the present remains itself and separate.

The third quality is that the oppositions tend to be represented by specific places—actual physical locations. Children's fiction often is focused on the nature of places—not just home but places like Green Gables or Treasure Island or Mr. MacGregor's garden or where the wild things are or Farmer Zuckerman's barn or Weetzie Bat's magical Los Angeles or the various old houses where characters in time fantasies find themselves in the past. And each of these places is associated with a set of values and concerns that exist significantly in opposition to another place that represents different concerns.

In *Children's Literature Comes of Age,* Maria Nikolajeva borrows a term from Bakhtin: *chronotope.* It refers to a specific combination of time and place. Nikolajeva says that it is "a genre category, that is, specific

forms of chronotope are unique for particular genres. . . . As Bakhtin shows, every literary mode, epoch, genre and even writer can be defined on the basis of the way in which they organize time and space" (121–22). If that's true, I might well argue that the chronotope of children's fiction tends to be oppositionally double: spaces or places that are defined as opposite but intersect with each other in ways that imply interactions but finally preserve the sense of separateness. Nikolajeva herself speaks of E. Nesbit, a writer I much enjoy, in exactly these terms: "The absurd idea of letting magical figures and objects appear in modern London, and the inability of modern humans to make use of magic are thoughts which appealed to Nesbit, and this is what all of her children's books are based on" (161).

Why might children's fiction be operating in this way? I think it might go back to the dynamics of the situation that most basically defines children's literature: adults writing books for children. All such literature emerges from one shared and very basic assumption: that children are different enough from adults to need a special literature of their own and enough like each other that adult writers can actually provide texts that will appeal to large numbers of children as a group, with, presumably, group characteristics. In other words, all children's literature is written across what must inevitably be perceived to be a gap, written for and often about a group to which the writer does not belong.[3] Thus, the concept that allows children's literature to exist at all is in itself binary and oppositional. It requires an adult writer different from and in many ways opposite to the child reader implied (and perhaps especially, as I suggested earlier, in terms of knowledge). It requires that the adult intermingle with the childlike but remain finally separate from it. It seems possible, then, that all the other binary oppositions of children's fiction represent replications of this basic one—repetitions of the primal scene of a text's engendering, as it were.

And I think it could be argued that they are. Treasure Island, where the wild things are, Mr. MacGregor's garden clearly represent versions of childhood as utopia—places where you get what you childishly want and, by getting it, learn not to want it so much anymore. A voyage to them is almost literally a repetition of the act whereby an adult travels into the presumably childlike imagination that engenders children's books. (Note also how a focus on places allows this to happen. The lost time of childhood can be visited when it's metamorphosed into a place, because, whereas times pass, places can exist simultaneously.) That's particularly true in time fantasies, in which the old houses redo-

lent of past time seem almost literal representations of a past gone and then reentered. Characters who represent blends of animal and human or toy and human, situations that mix miniatures with giants, all seem like variant forms of the same central oppositional view. Parts of them are childlike, parts adultlike. (Note, again, how literalizing metaphors allow magical interminglings. The child I once was myself is a memory buried in the past, but Peter Rabbit or the Indian in the cupboard is here and now and visitable.) And in all cases, the ambivalence of adults toward childhood, the sense that it represents a more deficient and yet superior way of seeing and being than adulthood, operates to create and maintain tensions—the pulls I spoke of earlier as giving me so much pleasure.

Indeed, the children's books I enjoy most remind me of the optical illusions often reproduced in books about the psychology of perception. Look once at the picture and it's the profile of an old woman's face; look again and it's a young woman's body. Look once at another picture and it's a vase; look again and it's two people staring at each other. But it's always one or the other; it's never possible to see both the old and the young woman at once or even to see some combination of the two. We see the old woman and know of the young woman only because she was there the last time we looked—and yet, the next time, there she is again. That's magical.

Furthermore, I suspect it's the maintenance of that tension, the old woman or the young woman but never the two combined, that leads to what strikes me as one final important source of my pleasure in children's fiction: its obsession with variational forms. Children's books tend to be constructed in terms of episodes that can be read as rejugglings of the same or similar components. They tend to occur in series in which the individual books represent variations of each other and tend, in any case, to be enough alike that often books by different authors can be read as reworkings of the same material: consider time fantasies, for instance, which represent an ingenious range of possibilities of using the same device and that nevertheless tend almost always to have significant thematic and structural similarities. Variational form seems most significantly to be a question of delaying closure or of avoiding its implications. The same story or a similar one can and must be retold many times, lest the happy ending triumph over the now-perceived-to-be unhappy beginning and end up claiming to show what happiness is once and for all—and in the process, presumably, kill childhood and the childlike forever. Variational form offers

the pleasure of being not grown up and then growing up again and again.

And in doing so, I think, it suggests why the pleasures I've outlined need not be guilty ones. Ideological theorists—Fredric Jameson, for instance—speak of literary texts as places where contradictions are staged in such a way that their contradictory nature ceases to be obvious.[4] In this way, ideologies protect those subject to them from knowledge of their deficiencies and thus maintain themselves and their power over us. The children's texts I read with pleasure clearly represent contradictory versions of childhood, as wisely innocent or stupidly ignorant. But in these texts, these views are staged in ways that *don't* mask the contradictions or allow resolution. They work, therefore, to keep readers of all ages aware, freer from the pressures of ideology than other kinds of texts might leave them. The subjectivity they construct is always ambivalent and subtle, always conscious of ambivalences and subtleties—always both childlike and aware of the limitations of childlikeness.

I realize that the construction of such a complex and aware subjectivity in actual children might distress some adults, who'd prefer their children simpler and more one-sided and more malleable. Since it's the subjectivity that I tend to understand as what I am when I am being my best self and the kind of subjectivity I admire most in others of all ages, I can only celebrate it and wish all children had access to it.

Notes

1. This also means that children's literature might be equipping children who read it a lot with a peculiar sense of being both in childhood and somehow beyond it, outside it, superior to it—a sort of divided consciousness that allows them both to identify with childlike characters and be separate from them. This suggests some weirdness in terms of the ways in which texts construct childhood as something children are both involved in and detached from, part of and superior to—a weirdness I intend to explore further as I develop my thoughts on these matters.

2. "The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage" is usually found as number 23 in English translations of the collected tales of the Brothers Grimm. None of the translations of *Kinder- und Hausmarchen* in my possession have this exact wording for the opening sentence. I seem to have made it up by myself somewhere along the way.

3. Writers do, of course, claim that they belong to the group—that they write for a child hidden within them or the child they once were, or something like that. But what's significant about these formulations is that the child—a being still conceived as being separate from the adult who harbors it—*is* hidden within. Indeed, it's interesting how often therapeutic procedures far removed from literary concerns insist on thinking of childhood in terms of this hidden other within us. Our ideas about childhood tend always, it seems, to express otherness and difference and separation and the need to bridge the gulf.

4. "The aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (79).

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Children's Literature 28 (2000): 38-43)

The Urge to Sameness

Perry Nodelman

What most struck me on first reading Rod McGillis's response to "Pleasure and Genre" was not something he says but something I said myself. Rod quite rightly chastises me for describing how texts of children's fiction invite us to "view the world as a child." Surely, I told myself, as I read these words, I hadn't actually said that? A frantic search through my own piece soon revealed the horrid truth: the offending words were there. I had, indeed, done exactly what I spend much of my professional life getting angry at others about.[1] I had based my reading of children's books on a generalization about children.

I hasten to say that I didn't really mean it—not in the way that Rod takes it. I was talking not about some existing "child" who might represent the behavior of a body of actual living children but about an intellectual construct, the concept of a child as unlike and opposite to adults because of a presumed innocence, a divergence from adult forms of thought. It is the perceptions of that imaginary child that I see adult and child readers sharing as they make their way through a text of children's fiction. That adults can experience it—for that matter, that adults writers are the ones who imagine it in the first place—suggests how detachable from the perceptual habits of living children I believe this construct to be.

Indeed, the major thrust of Tom Travisano's comments is to focus on my saying that and to suggest I am wrong about it—to make the case that there is in fact a generalizable childhood accurately represented by texts and existing in the world outside them. Such an essentialized childhood might indeed influence children as a self-fulfilling prophesy, a result of adults who believe it to be true acting as if it were true. But I remain committed to the position that this or any conception of childhood as a generalizable state distinct from other generalized states of being human exists primarily in human thought and language and is not, as Tom and the cognitive psychologists he quotes would have it, "hard-wired into our cognitive development." I'll say more about that later.

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Meanwhile, though, I can't be too hard on Tom and the psychologists when my sentence about viewing as a child replicates their behavior—when I myself so easily slipped into the very behavior I was in the process of separating myself from. Similarly, Rod is right to notice that my suspicion "that many child readers read as I do" implies a desire to homogenize reading, an urge to sameness. I meant to say something a little different, and I didn't say it clearly enough: not that actual readers inherently or even ideally share my reading strategies but that texts of children's fiction tend to set up conditions that invite readers to make sense of them in the ways I describe. This behavior might more accurately be ascribed to what reader-response theorists identify as "implied readers" than to real ones and represent ways in which the texts indicate and invite certain forms of meaning-making from those competent to interact with them as expected. I don't doubt that many readers do not act as expected, nor does it much bother me that they don't.[2] I do, though, suspect that many readers do in fact do what texts invite—that for good or ill, and despite personal differences, many of us do learn the competencies that allow us at least some degree of understanding of what writers and speakers want us to understand. Indeed, discussing what it is that texts seem to intend to do—determining how they might manipulate readers for or against their better interests—would hardly be worth doing if we believed that it never actually worked and that the texts did in fact always communicate entirely different things to different readers.

Rod knows that, of course. If he didn't, he wouldn't be concerned about whether we need to make children aware of the colonialist implications of *Where the Wild Things Are.* For that matter, he wouldn't need to make readers of this volume aware of what he understands to be the implications of my argument in "Pleasure and Genre." The possibility that children would become unwitting colonialists from their readings of Sendak, or critics unrepentant homogenizers from reading my article, implies Rod's own faith that a lot of people do read like each other and will, in fact, understand from texts what the texts seem to be wanting them to understand. It represents another version of the urge to sameness.

As I think about it, I find myself speculating that this urge is inherent in the very project of language. We would not have words, or texts of children's literature and criticism made up of words, if we did not wish others to see what we see and understand what we understand—to share our own experience. Furthermore, it's in the nature of lan-

guage to misrepresent exactly to the degree that it implies samenesses in different experiences: consider, for instance, the wide range of differing shades and hues that might be represented (or mistakenly confused for each other) through the use of the single word *red.* Those who look at a range of differing colors and agree they're all seeing red might well be losing sight of the variations in their individual perceptions.

It's for this sort of reason that I find myself unwilling to go along with Tom Travisano's acceptance of the conclusions of cognitive psychologists. No matter how careful and objective their procedures, they can't study the special thought processes of children without having already decided that "children" is indeed a category of individuals distinct from other human beings, worthy of study exactly in terms of exploring ways in which it is distinct, so that the conclusion about categorical difference is already built into the original untested assumption that the category significantly and accurately represents reality. In other words: cognitive psychologists invest too much unexamined faith in the urge to sameness inherent in the linguistic and cultural categories such as "child" that they take for granted. The danger of their doing so is clear in the history of bad "science" that emerged in earlier times from a similar untested acceptance of the biological reality of linguistic and cultural categories such as "Aryan" and "Semitic." There might someday be evidence untainted by cultural assumptions that a special sort of childlike thinking is hard-wired into humanity, but I'm not holding my breath.

There is a further urge to sameness, I think, in childhood studies as Tom conceives of it. I'm prepared to accept the possibility that psychological or sociological studies of childhood might enrich our understanding of children's literature—but not necessarily by allowing for a unified view of the nature of childhood. Cardinal Newman's utopian vision of different academic disciplines all offering compatible insights into one unified truth is no longer true, if indeed it ever was true. The assumptions of psychology or anthropology or literary study offer different, competing versions of the meanings of the same phenomena. A perception of all of them might well foreground the limitations of the ways each of them purports to be comprehensive in its understanding of something so complex as being young and human. But it would need to resist the urge to elide their differences in a misguided faith that total and unified understanding is possible.

Margaret Higonnet, meanwhile, might be accused of an opposite

urge to sameness, since her story about one unique child supports an assertion about what "children," in general, apparently, seem to be capable of. I share Margaret's conviction that we'll always be further ahead imagining what children are capable of than focusing, as the cognitive psychologists always seem to do, on what they might not be capable of. But the urge to imagine a sameness in children seems almost unavoidable in adults who choose to discuss children's literature.

And that, I think, is the major point of the project I've embarked on here. Children's literature exists simply because adults do imagine a sameness in the audience it's designed for, a set of shared characteristics that makes children enough like each other and similarly unlike adults to require special texts. My purpose is to explore the implications of that assumption in terms of how it creates distinctive characteristics in the texts it engenders. In other words: I want to figure out the similarities that result from the urge to sameness implied in the mere existence of something written by adults and called children's literature.

A major feature of my argument is a focus on the binary opposition between child and adult that the primal scene of adults writing for creatures conceived as being unlike themselves suggests and reinforces. Margaret questions that assumption—but does so, it seems to me, in revealingly utopian terms, asking "Must we construct binaries?" and going on to say, "Rather than relying on binaries, I find it useful to think of our many senses collaborating in the construction of our world." I sense a desire here that binaries *not* be so obvious a feature of texts written for children. I think I share that desire—it's pleasing to imagine less binary ways of thinking and texts that express them. But I am, nevertheless, convinced that the urge to sameness inherent in the linguistic category "child" and its inevitable opposition to the category "adult" mean that binaries do operate significantly in most children's literature most of the time, and that it's in our interest as scholars and in the interest of children to understand that better.

One reason for that is expressed by Rod's last sentence, which I heartily agree with: understanding the ways in which texts urge us to share the inevitably limiting worlds they construct, and helping children to understand them also, can only work to free us all from manipulation by them. Dropping a very significant *r* from one of my sentences, Rod imagines that my statement that the texts I admire work to keep us "*freer* from the pressures of ideology" actually suggested some

impossible utopian condition of being *"free"* of ideology. I share Rod's belief that, as thinking beings, we exist only and always in language, only and always, therefore, in the context of an urge to sameness, only and always in ideology.

I did, nevertheless, want to explore how the particular "sameness" I perceive in a significant number of children's books might be a source of pleasure—and how the specific pleasure in question might lead to an awareness of how the implied reader of these texts might be led to be more thoughtful about impositions of ideological sameness. I wanted—I still want—to eat my cake and have it, too, to both be aware of the dangers inherent in texts and still celebrate their ability to please. My project began with the perception that, despite my lengthy record of publications performing exactly the kind of ideologically aware analysis that Rod recommends, I still take pleasure in the very texts my work characterizes as repressive. My theory of how these texts manipulate the readers they imply into relatively healthy forms of awareness is an evolving attempt to allow myself and others both ideological consciousness *and* pleasure.

And I do want us to be free to enjoy them. I'm troubled by the Calvinist suspicion of what pleases that I hear in Rod's statement that "the very notion of pleasure at the millennium's end is troubling." I'm equally troubled by the urge to sameness inherent in the suggestion that any reading of *Where the Wild Things Are* that enjoys it without taking note of its colonialist leanings is a deficient reading, a reading not quite guilty enough—that all reading must always be similarly aware of what Rod calls difference.

I'm especially troubled because Rod is not alone in expressing these attitudes. In her president's address to the American Studies Association in 1998, Janet Radway could hardly surprise anyone familiar with the current world of literary scholarship by calling for a refiguring of her discipline so that it would focus not on unified and exclusionary ideas of the American but on exactly the kinds of difference that interest Rod, that allow and include a variety of different points of view, and that therefore reveal the "intricate interdependencies" in culture and in texts of a range of matters such as nationalism, race, culture, ethnicity, identity, sex, and gender. But in a footnote about her own work, Radway seriously undermines her celebration of difference by saying, "I place my own work within the traditional, 'Americanist,' highly spatialized paradigm of culture that I believe the new work on race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender explicitly challenges. . . . My thoughts in this address are now prompted by an engagement with the work of

others that challenges this fundamental presupposition." Her work is now unacceptable, she claims, exactly because it is different from the work that would celebrate difference by always and inevitably insisting on it—by making each and every voice express the same unified support of difference rather than allowing a range of different voices to intersect in their saying of different things. This dangerously repressive and currently popular urge to sameness threatens to homogenize literary scholarship just as thoroughly as the positions it purports to move beyond.

For that reason, I'm delighted that Margaret, Rod, and Tom have been willing to enunciate their differences with my own positions, and I particularly applaud Margaret's invitation to me and others to explore a variety of pleasures offered by texts of children's literature in addition to the one I've been devoting my attentions to. As Margaret describes them and I understand them, these pleasures aren't necessarily restricted to texts written for children, which is why I haven't devoted much thought to them yet. But if I'm right in assuming that the basic situation of an adult writing for children affects all aspects of the texts produced, then these pleasures, too, must emerge differently in children's literature than elsewhere. I plan to be thinking further about that—and also about the relations between pleasure and ideology that Rod foregrounds for me, and about the relations between depictions of childhood in texts for children and texts for adults that Tom raises. My ideas can only grow richer by intertwining and becoming interdependent with these different viewpoints.

Notes

1. See, for instance, the chapter "Common Assumptions About Childhood" in my book *The Pleasures of Children's Literature,* or ask any of my war-torn students.

2. I have to admit it *does* bother me a little. I tend to see understanding texts as not much different from understanding anything else. We all have different experiences of and tastes in, say, sofas, and different ways of thinking about them and using them. And any one of us is free to understand, say, a sofa, as a urinal, and use it accordingly—but we might be a happier community if we all agreed to pay enough attention to intended meanings to realize when other objects weren't intended as urinals and therefore we could share dry places to sit. In other words: literature is a communal activity, reading and writing about reading are social transactions based on convictions about the possibility that information is shareable—and it often is.

Work Cited

Radway, Janet. "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November, 1998." Available at http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/american_quarterly/v051/51.1radway.html.