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editor's comments

Long Underwear and Christian Verse

The novel I was teaching in my freshman literature class a while ago dealt with how unquestioningly most people accept conventional values; a student who clearly understood the point said, "Like, think about those weird pants people used to wear back in the seventies, with the wide cuffs and the bell bottoms—they didn't even realize how silly they looked!" The young woman who said this was herself wearing a pair of form-fitting trousers in a strangely familiar white knit material, with stirrups going into her shoes and under her feet—trousers that, to a person who still has a few cuffed bell bottoms hidden at the back of his closet, look very silly indeed. So I said, "You have the nerve to sit there in a pair of your father's long underwear and say that the pants I once wore were silly?" And she angrily replied, "Well, they *were* silly! And *everybody* wears pants like mine!"

The articles in this issue about social influences on children's literature reminded me of this conversation; as I edited them, I suddenly realized how significant it was that, while their writers have coolly and competently seen through the values and assumptions expressed in literature intended for people of other times or other sorts of literary background than their own (or mine), there is no article about the silly societal assumptions of children's literature critics in the nineteen-eighties. It's easier to notice others' stirrup pants than our own bell bottoms—easier to notice thoughtless prejudices we don't share than to be aware of our own unconscious assumptions.

Yet we inevitably have such prejudices. I offer as evidence a blindness of my own, unrelated to trousers, that I've recently become aware of. As a member of the ChLA canon committee and then editor of our three volumes' worth of essays on important children's books, I've spent much time in recent years thinking about which books might be considered touchstones for children's literature, and discussing that subject with others. Yet I didn't realize until after I'd finished editing the pamphlet that lists these books, and begun to write an introduction for the first of the *Touchstones* volumes, that one particularly important book was not listed as a touchstone, and had not, as far as I can recall, ever even been mentioned as a possible candidate for inclusion. While the *Touchstones* pamphlet suggests that the epics of Homer are significant because they tell a great story "that underlies contemporary culture," that the Greek myths are included because they "underlie our own culture," and that the stories of Norse gods and heroes "are a vital part of our literary heritage," it ignores the one book that most clearly underlies contemporary culture, and that has had the most direct influence on the history and the characteristics of our literature: the Bible.

That's an astonishing omission, for surely nobody can question the particular significance of the Bible in the study of European and American literature, of which children's literature is a part—and not just because the people who wrote most of the literature we treasure were themselves Christians. The Bible so permeated European and American culture for so long that even those who did not share any of the various faiths based on it could not help but be influenced by it. In *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, Northrop Frye speaks of "the mythical or imaginative universe" implied by literature, and says, "Most of my scholarly interests at present revolve around the thesis that the structure of the Bible provided the outline of such a universe for European literature" (vii); (he has since further explored that thesis in *The Great Code*). Frye goes on to say that, "In European literature, down to the last couple of centuries, the myths of the Bible have formed a special category, as a body of stories with a distinctive authority. Poets who attach themselves to this central mythical area, like Dante or Milton, have been thought of as possessing a special kind of seriousness conferred on them by their subject matter" (7).

It might, of course, be argued that the Bible is not an important touchstone for children's literature because none of what Frye says here applies specifically to children's literature; the Bible may be like Horace's Odes, which are undeniably important in our literary heritage but have had no immediately discernable influence on writing for children. Indeed, Frye himself does suggest that there is also another body of stories outlining a somewhat different mythic universe of great significance in European literature: folktales, which he sees as the basis for a popular tradition of romance that stands outside of and in many ways defies the authority of the biblical tradition. Because children's literature as we now know it has such clear connections with folktales (and thus with contemporary popular literature), we might argue that children's literature stands firmly apart from the mythic universe of serious adult literature defined by the Bible, and that the ChLA list of touchstones rightly ignores it.

But in fact, while children's literature shares much with the traditions of folk tales and consequently, with the patterns of popular literature, it is not as purely entertaining or as simply undemanding of learning in its audience as Frye suggests romance is. More obviously than most contemporary literature, children's literature tends to teach as well as please, and one of its purposes has always been to make inexperienced beginners into experts—members of the educated elite who might share the values implied by the mythic universe of the Bible. For that reason, it characteristically combines aspects of popular literature based on folktales with aspects of

"serious" literature like *Paradise Lost*, which, Frye says, "is elite not because it is biblical in its choice of subject, but because the whole structure of humanist learning, with biblical and classical mythology radiating out from it, has to be brought to bear on the reading and study of the poem" (27). While children's literature doesn't demand the whole structure of humanist learning, it certainly often demands good parts of it—not surprisingly, for one of its central purposes is to introduce and acclimatize newcomers to that structure.

Consequently, children's literature has throughout its history had clear and important connections with that whole structure of biblical and classical mythology. For centuries, of course, children's literature was nothing but doctrinal in focus, a body of instructional poetry and fable designed to make children into good Christians. (For centuries, indeed, the Bible itself was the main, if not the only, book that many children read or had read to them.) But more significant is the fact that the central ideas and images of children's literature even as it exists today have Biblical roots; even apparently unreligious books relate to that tradition.

For example, it's often been noted that children's literature has clear connections with a pastoral tradition that equates goodness with lack of sophistication and with closeness to one's roots in nature; but that pastoral tradition itself clearly relates to the image of paradise presented in Genesis. Furthermore, the ideals of innocence proclaimed in many supposedly non-Christian children's books clearly relate to an attitude toward childhood often espoused by Christ in the New Testament. It's also been noted by many scholars that the basic pattern of much children's literature is the circular journey; and the story of a rebellious youth who leaves home because it is constricting and then returns because its constrictions offer security has an obvious source in the biblical story of the prodigal son. Perhaps less obviously, another equally common story pattern of children's literature appears to be grounded in the folk tale tradition; but as Frye himself points out, that tradition has Christian roots also, so that the story of a weak and apparently powerless outsider who suffers for being different but who triumphs by having a secret magical power and supernatural assistance—the story of Cinderella, or of Superman, or of Wilbur the Pig in *Charlotte's Web*—is also the Divine Comedy—the story of Christ Himself.

The influence of the Bible can be felt in subtler ways also; even radically un-Christian children's stories can strike us as being stories at all only because they have features of narrative that we are able to recognize and admire; and our very ideas about what a story is are clearly based on biblical models: on the Old Testament narratives of kings and heroes which are organized around central moral or religious issues, and which teach us to expect stories to have structures related to their themes; and perhaps above all in children's literature, on the parables of the New Testament.

Given all that, it's astonishing that the Bible should not have been mentioned as a possible touchstone for children's literature. I have to conclude that happened only because I myself and the other members of the canon committee were acting on unconscious assumptions of the anti-bell-bottom sort. People who think a lot about children's literature don't think about the Bible at all—at least not in relation to children's literature; and if we do, then we obviously tend to conclude that it is irrelevant.

Or even dangerous. For the simple fact is that, for many humane, sensitive North Americans nowadays, and perhaps especially including many of us who teach children's literature, the Bible has developed a sinister reputation; it has come to be the tool of The Enemy. Many of those obnoxious people who want to keep good books out of the hands of children because they think children are weakminded enough to adopt every dangerous idea and attitude they read about often use the Bible as the authority for their narrow-minded bigotry; so those of us who oppose such censorship tend to think of the Bible as Evil, and certainly not to be recommended for children, lest they learn from it the anti-humane prejudices shared by so many of its most ardent readers.

Furthermore, the Bible is not the only book we ignore because it expresses religious values we don't share or, even if we do share them, feel uncomfortable with in the context of children's literature. A member of ChLA who is also a devout Christian has quite rightly pointed out to me in a letter about the editorial policy of the *Quarterly* that this journal takes part in a vast conspiracy of silence about children's literature with a spiritual emphasis. The books published by Christian presses are not available anywhere but in religious book stores; they certainly don't get reviewed in the usual mainstream reviewing organs, or recommended for public libraries by the usual mainstream bodies who recommend children's books; and they are certainly not considered as possible touchstones or even discussed in articles in journals like this one. We simply act as if this massive body of literature intended for children did not exist at all.

And I suspect that we often do it quite deliberately. I have in my possession a copy of a letter from the staff of a prestigious children's magazine explaining to a writer that they will not publish some material sent to them, not because it is not well-written (they claim to have "enjoyed" reading the work), but because "We try to steer clear of biblical themes and associations because quite a few of our readers' parents object to them."

Now I am not myself a Christian; I have no special religious axe of my own to grind here. But I find the assumptions beyond that comment both astonishing and objectionable. They reveal a common form of intolerance by theoretically tolerant people, an intolerance that amounts to censorship. It seems to be based on the peculiar assumption that, in order to have true religious freedom, we must never express a religious idea—we must, indeed, be free of religion, for to allow the expression of any one particular religious idea would be an insult to those who believe otherwise, and perhaps in particular, to those who believe nothing. Consequently, we tell ourselves, our literature for children must be free of religious bias.

But that, of course, is impossible. It's impossible to describe human behavior without expressing an opinion about it, impossible to write a novel without suggesting ideas about what matters and what doesn't, and about

how people should behave—and these, of course, are matters of faith, ideas we must *believe* to be true simply because, as is not the case with logically quantifiable data, it is equally possible to believe something different. So writers always either assume we share their faith, or ask us to share it. As a statement about what we should believe and about how we should act as a consequence of that faith, *Charlotte's Web* is as surely religious as is any book published by a religious tract house.

But, you will quickly say, there is an important difference: *Charlotte's Web* does not sermonize. It is a work of art because its themes and ideas develop naturally out of the material, rather than being intrusively imposed on the material. Yet thematic intrusiveness may often exist merely in the eye of the dissenting beholder; let's not forget that the apparent sexism of the great writers of other centuries, which seems so obvious and annoying to us, was merely part of what they took on faith, and so, for them and for their original readers, quite natural and quite inevitable. Given their authors' convictions, then, the themes of religious books may grow no less inevitably out of their material than the themes of *Charlotte's Web* grow from E. B. White's materials, given E. B. White's values; and for someone with different values, White's themes might well not seem so inevitable. I wonder if the real difference between *Charlotte's Web* and a book whose values are clearly and avowedly Christian (or Buddhist, or Marxist, or feminist) is less the relative intrusiveness of their values than the fact that the readers who find the values of *Charlotte's Web* unobtrusive do so because they themselves share them—and probably don't share those other values. Those who share the unconscious assumptions E. B. White brought to *Charlotte's Web* will simply take them for granted, just as my student takes her stirrup pants for granted; and those of us who are involved with children's books are quite likely to share White's literate, liberal, humane values.

But if that is indeed the case, then our massive refusal to allow expressions of other values and other faiths into the canon of children's literature is an act of intense bigotry—an act contrary to the humane tolerance that most of us claim to espouse. If we can allow ourselves to discuss only those books that contain ideas we agree with and do not object to, then we are narrow-minded indeed.

The official religion of this journal should warn us that we cannot afford that narrow-mindedness. It is the religion of literature—a particular version of literature of course, for as Terry Eagleton so rightly says, "By and large, people term 'literature' writing which they think is *good*...we can drop once and for all the illusion that the category 'literature' is 'objective,' in the sense of being eternally given and immutable. Anything can be literature" (10)—anything that a group of people value as literature. In theory, what the group of people this journal serves value is writing for children that offers certain satisfactions of form and style—satisfactions we see as good and proclaim with religious fervor. So ours is primarily a religion of form; we like to believe that it transcends the liberal humanism or Christianity or Judaism or Republicanism of its individual members. If it does, we need to consider the possibility that satisfying forms may indeed express explicitly Christian values.

More important, if we leave those religious children's books to the Christian press, they are obviously not going to be judged on the basis of the values of our own particular religion—on their style or their effective storytelling. They are going to be judged purely on the basis of whether or not they are doctrinally sound. One result of that lack of attention to their literary merit is that many such books do tend to be woefully inadequate literature: well-intentioned, doctrinally correct, and rife with shallow characters, bad plots, and ineffective prose. Too many young Christians (or Marxists, or whatever) grow up on books that are good for their souls and bad for their development of literary taste; they will learn the religion of their parents, but nothing of the delights of the religion of literature. Some serious investigation of this work that views it with the same assumptions we bring to the other sorts of children's literature we consider in this journal might both let those of us who don't share the faith in on some good books, and raise the consciousness of doctrinal purists of every shade and color as to the significance of a good story well told, whatever values it happens to be in aid of. Christian children deserve that as much as do the children of liberal humanists.

With all that in mind, I've been trying to attract some critical commentary to the *Quarterly* on the literary values of this vast unwashed of children's literature—Christian literature in particular, simply because there is so much of it, but all forms of doctrinally specific literature in general. I'm happy to report that there'll be an article in this Winter's *Quarterly* on the literary value of various children's versions of the Bible, and I've been promised another piece about some of the fiction and poetry being published by Christian presses that might be of interest to the rest of us. I encourage others to explore this literature also.

Meanwhile, I've an example of the sort of literary pleasure we might find in this material—*A Pillar of Pepper and Other Bible Rhymes*, an often charming collection of verse by John Knapp II with competently professional illustrations by Dianne Turner Deckert. Despite the charm and the competence, this book has been quite totally ignored by mainstream organs devoted to children's literature, and for an obvious reason; it was published by the David C. Cook Publishing Company, whose letterhead proudly proclaims that it has been "Serving His Church since 1875."

For those who assume that all practicing Christians are narrow-minded bigots who believe that children are incapable of thinking wisely for themselves, Knapp's preface to this collection will come as a pleasant (or maybe infuriating) surprise. He does say what such people might have expected him to say—that he wrote these poems with religious instruction as a main goal: "As a Sunday school teacher I have become alarmed at how many children arrive at class, week after week, with God's word tucked under their arms, but very little of it in their heads...I hope that *A Pillar of Pepper* can help children learn about the Bible. Possessing facts, of course, does not make anyone a Christian. But with information a child can be led to Christ, and a child who already believes can become more firmly established" (11). What is surprising

is that this insistence of the value of the poems as indoctrination is accompanied by a refreshing open-mindedness about what children can and should enjoy and understand, expressed in terms that will sound quite familiar to readers of the *Quarterly*. Knapp says, for instance, that "to those who share traditional nursery rhymes with children, as I do, it soon becomes obvious that the young enjoy much that they do not, and cannot understand.... As a parent and former elementary teacher, I have long been aware of the uncanny language ability of children in their early years.... Should children be shielded from pain, disease, and death in literature? Most teachers and scholars say no—not usually. Children already know these exist, more than we realize" (10). This litany of reassuringly liberal attitudes to children's literature is accompanied by an equally reassuring litany of experts' names: Kornei Chukovsky, Nicholas Tucker, Bruno Bettelheim. Knapp apparently finds it quite possible to be both a devout Christian and a devout follower of the religion this journal celebrates.

He is also a witty and entertaining poet—or versifier, perhaps, for his work doesn't particularly aspire to heights of lyrical intensity; as the witty title of the book suggests, Knapp is mostly out to give his audience fun. His verses describe biblical subjects in the meters and rhymes of Mother Goose rhymes; they succeed because those rhymes are so surprising, and at first glance, so apparently inappropriate to the subjects. In yoking together the relaxed jollity of Mother Goose and the serious implications of the biblical materials he works with, Knapp revitalizes those materials; and he does so in a way that often implies a convincingly childlike innocence and convincingly childlike faith.

Knapp creates these effects by indulging in apparently irreverent informal language, delightfully silly rhymes, and theoretically inappropriate rhythms, all of which successfully capture that matter-of-fact reporting of the strange and absurd that characterizes Mother Goose:

> When Jereboam had God's Word,
> When King Jerry finally heard
> That God would bless him, it's absurd
> To think he would become a nerd!
> But that is simply what occurred. (53)

Or of Nebuchadnezzar,

> Soon this foolish king
> Messed up everything.
> (His head must have been filled with rocks.)
> Then for seven long years,
> In sorrow and tears,
> God made him eat grass like an ox. (61)

Sometimes, Knapp finds odd images that allow him to see old stories in a refreshing new way. Adam is "The First Tailor" because he

> needed some pants
> Before anyone had'em.
> He sinned before
> Harvesting cotton or flax,
> So he stitched up some fig leaves
> to make the first slacks. (20; since it was so long ago, they probably had bell bottoms)

Above all, Knapp uses metrical patterns we identify with comedy to describe solemn situations, as in this limerick based in Exodus:

> Asked a grumbling child named Hannah,
> "Could I have an orange or banana?
> I've just had enough
> Of this fluffy white stuff;
> It's boring to only eat manna!" (32)

In turning biblical material into something like Mother Goose rhymes, Knapp creates an aura of comic absurdity that is charmingly jolly, but paradoxically, and unlike the anarchy of the original Mother Goose, anything but irreverent. These poems express a faith so confident that it can even afford to laugh at itself—to find and enjoy the apparent absurdities in The Word of The Lord, if it is taken literally and at face value. It's that confident absolute conviction that allows these verses to transcend mere propaganda and deserve the attention even of those who do not share their faith; like *Charlotte's Web*, these poems don't merely assert a faith—they *express* it, in a way that makes it seem natural and inevitable.

I have to admit that I find Knapp's poems based on New Testament subjects less convincing. Some of them do retain the air of comic irreverence:

> There once was a man Ananias,
> Who hid a most dishonest bias
> His gift to Saint Peter
> Proved him such a cheater,
> He fell down stone-dead on the dais. (116)

But for the most part, these New Testament poems are more clearly and more directly about matters of doctrinal faith, and more obstinately insist on sermonizing:

> Zacchaeus was as short
> As this odd poem about him;
> He first saw the Lord
> From a sycamore tree limb.
> But if you consider
> High places too scary,
> You can meet Jesus
> Somewhere ordinary.

The uneasiness of the meter here is something that Knapp rarely allows himself when his subjects are less doctrinal; it suggests that the effect of the poem depends more on shared faith than on literary merit.

Yet this poem still works as an expression of its material—it does accurately express the thrust of the New Testament as a collection of parabolic anecdotes with an obvious message of faith, just as Knapp's Old Testament poems accurately express the thrust of the Old Testament as a collection of interesting and strange stories. So while this may indeed be an inferior poem, it may also be just a poem that my own assumptions and values prevent me from perceiving objectively. It may be a pair of stirrup pants that look like long undies to a person like me, but that have the potential to delight those with a taste for that fashion.

In either case, however, Knapp's verse is competent enough, and the issues it raises about doctrine in relation to form significant enough, to deserve more attention

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(Lytle, 1982) from teacher and students as they read literary works. In these protocols the participants were asked to verbalize what they did, thought, and felt as they read pieces of literature. This methodology will help provide a fuller picture of the ways in which adolescents learn to respond within a given context.

In Part II of this article, I will discuss some of the findings of this study.

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than the total silence they have been met with by the children's literature establishment. Let us appreciate the workmanship of each other's trousers, even if we don't like the way they are cut.

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