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# Write4Children

Vol. 1 Issue 2

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# Editorial

Welcome to the second edition of Write4Children. When we launched the first edition back in November, 2009, we had no idea how successful the journal was going to be. It seems an age ago now. We have received emails from all over the world not only congratulating us but also informing us how the journal is now being used as an educational resource. This is great news because that was the intention from the very beginning. It was a deliberate part of the editorial strategy to make subscribing to the journal free for this very reason: it was to be a quality resource made available to everyone and not restricted by cost.

Once again we have received an eclectic mix of articles. Starting with Michael Rosen's Philippa Pearce Lecture which he presented last year at Homerton College entitled, 'An apology for poetry'. Despite the title the article is in fact a defence of poetry. Laura Atkins from Roehampton University has conducted a case study on Web 2.0 which discusses white privilege and children's publishing. It is worth noting at this point that both Laura and Michael are members of the Write4Children e-journal Facebook group where current news, matters of interest and information about members are posted – once again it is open access: http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/group.php?gid=115165817309&ref=ts

Bridget Carrington's article, 'Many Leagues Behind: Researching the History of Fiction for YA Girls' presents a good case for the history of fiction for young adults in general, and for girls in particular, stretches back far further than is usually credited. It is an interesting and thought provoking article. Virginia Lowe from Australia regales us with her research into being a parent observer of her children and their reading. Whilst Edel Wignell looks at writing humorous and nonsense verse for children.

In the previous edition, a member of our editorial board, Prof Peter Hunt, wrote an article entitled, 'Reading Children's Literature and Writing for Children' which the author Katherine Langerish has written her own personal response to. It is crucial to note here that the editors see it as their role to encourage debate without endorsing a position and it is to be hoped such debates can continue in this spirit – for there are many points of view to be considered before the issues can be reconciled into conclusions.

Another member of our editorial board, Prof Maria Nikolajeva, has written a short piece introducing The Cambridge/Homerton Research and Teaching Centre for Children's Literature, which is a joint venture between Homerton College and the Faculty of Education at University of Cambridge. The Centre is holding the international 'Emergent Adult' conference in September – see: http://talks.cam.ac.uk/talk/index/21253. Also you can keep an eye on the Facebook page for more information.

Finally, putting a Journal together is an extremely rewarding collaboration between contributors, reviewers and readers. As editors, our job is made all the easier by the standard of material we receive. We hope you enjoy our latest edition and will want to participate by submitting a paper for the next. We have come a long way in a very short time and long may the progress continue. And soon we hope to announce closer ties with NAWE (and their Journal, Writing in Education); AAWP in Australia (and their Journal, TEXT) and a number of other options in the promotion of writing for children and children's literature. That being said, we are always looking for people to add to our peer review panel. If you are interested please contact us directly at write4children@winchester.ac.uk (and this may be an ideal opportunity for Research and Graduate students to engage in an international project). May you now enjoy reading the new issue as much as we have.

Andrew Melrose and Vanessa Harbour
Editors

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write4children

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Write4Children

# Philippa Pearce Memorial Lecture, Homerton College, Cambridge: An Apology for Poetry

Michael Rosen

Former Children's Laureate

This is the  the Philippa Pearce Memorial lecture given by Michael Rosen in September 2009 at Homerton College, Cambridge.

*

First, many thanks to Homerton College and the Philippa Pearce Memorial steering group for inviting me to give this lecture and thanks too,  to all of you who've taken the effort to come today. I knew Philippa a little, and always had the sense about her that she was part of the reason why I and all of us writing for children have the good fortune and pleasure of having an audience. She created scenes of such powerful feelings – anxiety, loss, mystery, danger, fun and the like, full of meaning and significance – that she created readers, and readers create other readers.

My job today is to talk about poetry and I should clear up something right at the outset. The word 'apology' does of course mean some kind of statement to do with being sorry, but there is an older meaning to the word which signifies a defence of a position, coming from the Greek word we know today as 'apologia'. So, I won't be saying sorry for anything today. I will be putting up an argument in defence of poetry. You might well ask, but who's attacking it? And this takes us back to Philip Sidney who wrote a paper which was named – not by him – but by his first publishers,  one as  'An Apology for Poetry', and the other  as 'The defence of poesy.' It was probably written in the winter of 1579-80.

Philip Sidney grew up at the heart of the ruling elite's political and religious struggles. He was given a full formal education from the age of 7, first with tutors from whom he learnt Latin, Italian and French. Then, at the age of 10, he was sent away to Shrewsbury Grammar School, a move that allied the family with the English Protestant hierarchy but also entailed a rigorous, nine and a half hour day working through, Cicero, Terence, Cato, Tully, Caesar, Livy, Ovid, Horace, Virgil, Xenophon as well as the French romances of Belleforest, amidst a good deal of worship along Calvinist lines.

Next stop was Christchurch, Oxford with yet more Cicero, Horace and Virgil, along now with Aristotle’s works on rhetoric – or what we would now call literary theory. It was at this point that he caught the eye of the Tudor’s top man – Sir William Cecil. To spell this out, this meant that Philip Sidney was going to be groomed for high office in Protestant England. One of the consequences of this was that he was sent by Elizabeth on a kind of three year prototype Grand Tour of Europe taking in Poland, Prague, Hungary and Italy as well as places nearer at home, intermingled with diplomacy, and scouting for possible suitors for Elizabeth – or playing the game of scouting for suitors. This amazing period also drew him into the circle of the Tudors’ spymaster, Sir Francis Walsingham and many of Europe’s major power-players.

When he gets back in England, he is clearly one of Elizabeth’s boys, with his life, career and marriage circumscribed by the nuanced requirements of the Elizabethan experiment with nationalist, unreformed Protestantism. So what is someone of this background doing writing a defence of poetry?

Well, the year he wrote it, Edmund Spenser had dedicated his poem ‘Shepherd’s Calendar’ to Sidney. But there was another event. You’ll remember that the Elizabethan experiment didn’t simply involve a struggle between Catholic and Protestant but also involved what would turn out to be a deeper and more long-lasting struggle – signs of it are all about us today – of unreformed Protestantism’s conflict with the various strands of Calvinism which we’ve come to call Puritanism.

*In 1579, one Stephen Gosson dedicated a pamphlet to Sidney called:*

THE *Schoole of Abuse,*
*Conteining a plesaunt in-*
uective against Poets, Pipers,
Plaiers, Iesters and such like
Caterpillers of a commonwealth;
Setting vp the Flagge of Defiance to their
mischieuous exercise, and ouerthrow-
ing their Bulwarkes, by Prophane
Writers, Naturall reason, and common experience:
*A discourse as pleasaunt for*
Gentlemen that fauour lear-
ning, as profitable for all that wyll
follow vertue.

This title in itself lays out very well the Puritan position: it is militant with its ‘flag of defiance’, it is, in spite of the Puritans’ seeming hostility to unfettered imagination and sensual imagery, happy to introduce a visceral poetic image: ‘caterpillars of a commonwealth’’; and it lumps together a set of people whose activities in the name of verbal and bodily pleasure he deems to be ‘mischievous’: ‘poets, pipers, players, jesters and such like’. More surprisingly, perhaps, he claims, these people can be overthrown not by religious argument but by ‘common experience’, ‘natural reason’ and the words of ‘profane’ (ie non-religious writers). The result will be ‘profitable for all that will follow virtue’. ‘Virtue’ is a key word here. Puritans are virtuous people, who if they work, study and are industrious, will achieve ‘virtue’, a godly state of being here on earth. Poets, pipers, players and jesters don’t have virtue. They are mischievous. Here is Gosson in full flow:

...and I should interject here that part of this talk today is about us enjoying the vigour, self-confidence and inventiveness of sixteenth century poetic prose as a form of poetry in itself.

> The deceitfull Phisition giueth sweete Syrropes to make his poyson goe downe the smoother: The Iuggler casteth a myst to worke the closer: The *Syrens* song is the Saylers wrack: The Fowlers whistle, the birdes death : The wholesome bayte, the fishes bane: The Harpies haue Virgins faces, and vultures Talentes: *Hyena* speakes like a friend, and deuoures like a Foe: The calmest Seas hide dangerous Rockes: the Woolf iettes in Weathers felles: Many good sentences are spoken by *Danus,* to shadowe his knauery: and written by Poets, as ornaments to beautifye their woorkes, and sette theyr trumperie too sale without suspect.

Nb ‘iettes’ is ‘jets’ and in this context means ‘struts about’ – ‘Weathers felles’ means essentially rain. Ie the wolf uses the cover of rain to come out into the open in a boastful way

> No marueyle though *Plato* shut them out of his schoole, and banished them quite from his common wealth, as effeminate writers, vnprofitable members, and vtter enimies to vertue.

If you enter the school of Poetry, as Gosson calls it, you will pass on to

> ...Pyping, from Pyping to playing, from play to pleasure, from pleasure to slouth, from slouth to sleepe, from sleepe to sinne, from sinne to death, from death to the deuill,.

In other words, through disguising its knavery and trumpery, poetry leads you downwards – via music, laziness and sin – to Hell.

So Sidney decided to defend poetry against this. Firstly, we should be clear that Sidney uses the word ‘poetry’ to sometimes mean what we would also call ‘poetry’ but at other times he means literary writing – verse, fiction and drama. This poetry has to be defended because it is, he says, always derived from ‘nature’ , a word which we can take today to mean more like the whole of existence and experience. However, the poet isn’t tied into representing nature as it is – as Mathematicians, lawyers, grammarians and Philosophers have to do.

> Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops. Chimeras, Furies and such like

So literature has a promethean quality of creating nature. When it imitates by means of Aristotle’s ‘mimesis’, Sidney argues, it is

> a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth to speake Metaphorically. A speaking Picture, with this end to teach and delight,

– quite the opposite model of Gosson's syrup and poison, where the problem is the pleasure. This image of the 'speaking picture' has rightly become famous. Poetry as a speaking picture is an idea we can take with us into the present with its purpose to 'teach and delight'.

But this poesy has other functions. People sing the Psalms 'when they are merry'

> and I knowe", Sidney says "is used with the frute of comfort by some, when in sorrowfull panges of their death bringing sinnes, they finde the consolation of the never leaving goodnes.

– Comfort and consolation then, even at death. Again, the opposite view of Gosson, who saw poetry as taking you to the devil. What's more, says Sidney,

> This purifying of wit, this enriching of memorie, enabling of judgement, and enlarging of conceit, which commonly we cal learning, … the finall end is, to lead and draw us to as high a perfection, as our degenerate soules made worse by their clay-lodgings, can be capable of.

Enriching of memory, enabling of judgement, enlarging of our conceptual abilities (that's 'conceit') pleasure, consolation, perfection and salvation. This is what you can get from Poetry, Sidney is saying. Then in a remarkable passage, Sidney explains that whereas other disciplines explain and argue, poetry can show us emotion manifest in action.

> Let us but hear old Anchices, speaking in the middest of Troies flames, or see Ulisses in the fulnesse of all Calipsoes delightes, bewaile his absence from barraine and beggarly Itheca….

We gain what he calls 'insight into anger' when we see Sophocles' Ajax 'whipping sheep and oxen'., and further insights into feelings such as 'remorse of conscience in Oedipus', 'soon repenting pride in Agamemnon', 'self-devouring cruelty in Atreus', 'the violence of ambition in the two Theban brothers', and 'the sour sweetness of revenge in Medea'

And how do we, as readers and listeners receive these? Sidney says, "…we seeme not to heare of them, but clearly to see through them." So, that's to say, I think, that through absorbing these moments in literature we come to understand their true purpose and essence; their meaning becomes transparent or clear without our consciously hearing how. And the result of all this is that when we read, say of "Dives burning in hell, and Lazarus in Abrahams bosome," these end up " inhabit[ing] both the memorie and judgement." So, he is saying, by showing us these emotions in action, poetry ends up being 'memorable' but also ends up by being absorbed into our 'judgement' – or as we might call it - our value-system.

The poet, Sidney concludes, is a ‘popular philosopher’. But this isn’t boring taught philosophy – and he mocks dry dusty academic philosophy teaching. This kind of teaching – through poetry - happens in another way:

> For who will be taught, if he be not mooved with desire to be taught?

- a notion that flew in the face of the caners, beaters, drillers and bores of Sidney’s own time and goes on flying down through the centuries since.

The poet – and he really does mean our meaning of ‘poet’ here - can do this because

hee commeth to you with words set in delightfull proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for the well enchanting skill of musicke,And as an aside, he adds, it’s not just the great classic writers who do this:

> Certainly I must confesse mine owne barbarousnesse, I never heard the old Song of Percy and Duglas{88}, that I founde not my heart mooved more than with a Trumpet; and yet is it sung but by some blinde Crowder

He is referring here to the old folk ballad now known as ‘Chevy Chase’. But how does poetry work? Sidney says:

> Verse far exceedeth Prose, in the knitting up of the memorie, the reason is manifest, the words (besides their delight, which hath a great affinitie to memorie) being so set as one cannot be lost, but the whole woorke failes…Besides one word, so as it were begetting an other, as be it in rime or measured verse, by the former a man shall have a neare gesse to the follower.

There is in poetry, a way in which a formal poem is measured out in such a way that dropping a word, spoils the whole and this in turn gives it a predictive quality:  the pattern enables us to sense what is coming next.

I think all this constitutes a fascinating defence. There’s a good deal we can take straight into now to help us understand what poetry offers us and what poetry can do.

But surely, in the present context, poetry doesn't need to be defended. And I should say my job today is not to talk about poetry in general – as Sidney did – but to defend it as an art for children. And yet, surely no one's attacking it? Well, I'm going to suggest that there has been an attack, and the attack has gone on by default, even as publicly, and in official policy, it's been defended. The process will be familiar to many of you, if only because I've talked about it before – perhaps too often – so excuse me going over old ground.

I'll put it this way. I was speaking at a joint meeting of headteachers from the NAHT and teachers from the NUT to discuss the forthcoming campaign against SATs. One headteacher was quite explicit. He said that he taught in a school made up almost entirely of children whose first language is not English. By comparing results in the SATs from year to year, he now knows (or is it 'thinks'?) that he can inch his school's position up the local league tables if he drops all reading of poetry and stories and spends most of year 6 drilling the children in exercises geared to matching the tests. He hates doing it, he says. He can see the effect it has on the children emotionally, behaviourally and intellectually, he said, but the league tables rule. He would love to be reading stories and poetry but he can't take the risk, he said.

So, we don't have a Stephen Gosson, as Philip Sidney had, we have a process, or a set of practices that quietly and insidiously have taken over in many schools. Not all schools by any means. Where teachers and parents have had the confidence to carry on reading and enjoying all books, poetry included, this attack has been resisted. What's more, where parents have the knowledge and experience of what books and poetry can do for children, they too have carried on borrowing, buying, reading books and poetry with their children….which leaves a percentage – how big? perhaps we'll never know – of children of whom we can say, if they don't come across books and poetry when they're at school, they will probably never come across it. And somewhere, deeply embedded in what I've called a quiet and insidious practice is a notion that says, in effect, 'So be it. It doesn't matter. If those children don't get books and poetry. Tough.' Instead of Sidney's account of 'insight into anger' , the soon repenting pride in Agamemnon, the self-devouring cruelty in Atreus, the violence of ambition in the two Theban brothers and the sour sweetness of revenge in Medea, those children will have this: (and again excuse me to those who've heard me read this before). I quote verbatim from a worksheet and in its entirety. It's not me cutting anything here.

> 'Perseus and the Gorgons
>
> This is part of a myth from ancient Greece
>
> At last Perseus found the Gorgons. They were asleep among the rocks, and Perseus was able to look at them safely.
>
> Although they were asleep, the live serpents which formed their hair were writhing venomously. The sight filled Perseus with horror. How could he get near enough without being turned to stone?
>
> Suddenly Perseus knew what to do. He now understood why Athena had given him the shining bronze shield. Looking into it he saw clearly the reflection of the Gorgons. Using the shield as a mirror, he crept forward. Then with a single swift blow he cut off the head of the nearest Gorgon. Her name was Medusa.

> In one mighty swoop, Perseus grabbed the head of Medusa. He placed it safely in his bag and sprang into the air on his winged sandals'

To my mind this is utterly insufficient. It's an act of deliberate deprivation to deliver this up to children, as it denies them the context and motive for action, and in so doing drains the story of fear and tension. Or to put it another way, as we don't know why Perseus is going to see the Gorgons, we don't feel with him the danger. If we don't feel the danger, we don't enjoy the ingenuity of his success nor the pleasure in his ultimate victory. The engine at the heart of literature has been taken out of this piece purely in order that the writing can be used as a pretext for asking a set of comprehension questions as printed on the other side of the story:

> 'Why had Perseus brought a bag with him?'
>
> 'Who had given Perseus his shield?'

And so on for ten more questions like it, each with specifically right answers. Empricism has seized power. Sidney is overthrown. So, I say, in the face of this kind of mental cruelty, I think we need as stout a defence of poetry for children (and perhaps I'll leak over into Sidney's broader use of the word poetry than our contemporary usage), as Sidney offered. Where he was speaking with all the confidence of a rising class of Tudor Protestant nationalists and humanists, I'll borrow some of that humanism and marry it to some ideas to do with: the rights of individuals to explore their identities – including and especially language; along with what is in effect a form of internationalism which work in classrooms affords us.

I've spoken too long on this subject without reading a poem.

**My Mate Darren by Paul Lyalls p.134 *A-Z of Poetry* edited by Michael Rosen (Puffin 2009)**

When I was a kid, my best mate Darren had
a great way of getting his toy soldiers to have a war.
He'd line them up on the kitchen floor,
close the kitchen door, draw the kitchen window blind,
set an alarm clock to ring in one minute's time,
switch off the kitchen light, making the kitchen as dark as night.
Then he'd take his tennis racquet
and swing it from left to right with all his might
knocking his soldiers everywhere,
sending them flying through the air.
Making them spin – even his doing joined in,
Scampering about with a mouthful of toy soldiers

sticking out.
Then when the alarm clock would ring, whichever side
had the most soldiers still standing would win.
Years later, Darren now a man, strong and big,

was helping his mum bring in a brand new fridge.
When he moved the old one,
he found underneath, in the dirt and the grease
3 toy soldiers who were still fighting the war,
waiting for an enemy that wasn't there anymore.
He dusted them down, stood them gently on the ground
and with as much love as he could,
he told them.
'It's over, you no longer need to be a toy soldier.
You can go back to your wives,
your families and friends you used to know,
lead your former lives. The fighting finished 10 years ago.'
As gently as he could he told them 'there is no more war'.
But no one told his dog,
who ran back in and chewed them up once more.

My first point will be to say that poetry like this does a lot of things at the same time.

Here are some of them:

It tells a story
It offers us Sidney's 'speaking picture'
Which, in turn teaches and delights us…
...and delights us in many different ways, one of which is
that it is derived from nature – or as we would say now, from experience and existence

But part of this is that it 'counterfeits' and 'represents', as Sidney put it – that's to say there is something symbolic going on in the poem that is more than what it appears to be talking about. There is also emotion manifest in action – some of which we can give names to – delight in play, something to do with the absurdity of war or destruction, and something to do with the difference between humans and animals, perhaps…and a whole lot more besides.

We've also got something here of Sidney's 'well enchanting skill of musicke. '

The unfolding of the poem with its rhythm and rhyme (and the expectations that go with these) gives us the sense that this story will roll along through to a conclusion, but also perhaps in the rhyme there is some kind of gentle self-mockery, that undermines the seriousness of the protagonists. And what of the promethean aspect? Well, the construction of the whole piece - its crescendo, Darren's supposed speech, are precisely this. 'A form that was never in nature', as Sidney says.

And the poem enters Sidney's 'memory and judgement'. We are aided in the memory by the rhyme – when I see Paul Lyalls I've started saying to him:

> there is no more war'
>
> but no one told his dog,
>
> who ran back in and chewed them up once more.

And what about the judgement, that value-system inside us? By some process – that Sidney says taught us by 'moving us to be taught', the values of the poem find their way in, find their place – 'inhabit', Sidney says, perhaps snugly, perhaps by challenging it, perhaps by co-operating with it - in whatever value system we call our own. So, at one level perhaps it does say with the poem, 'no more war' but at another, doesn't the poem have a laugh at the simplicity (or is it the simplistic nature?) of saying 'no more war'? Is there a conversation here being had with the end of 'Dulce et Decorum est,' when Wilfred Owen says:

> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
> Bitter as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,
> The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
> Pro patria mori.

Then again, the poem seems also to be inhabiting similar territory – but in a comic, ironic way, to the end of T*he House at Pooh Corner.*

> Christopher Robin was going away. Nobody knew why he was going; nobody knew where he was going: indeed, nobody even knew why he knew that Christopher Robin *was* going away

In Milne's words, there is something ineffable and mysterious about 'the going away' of growing up. But then in place of 'that enchanted place on the top of the Forest' where 'a little boy and his Bear will always be playing' , we've got the gritty naturalism of Paul Lyalls' soldiers stuck under an old fridge, followed by the dog eating them again.

So, I think this constitutes something like Sidney's 'popular philosophy'.  In the place, of A.A.Milne's time-fighting suggestion that either childhood goes on forever, or that it survives because of his own book, we have Lyalls' bluntness that leaves us with Darren not as a child but as a man and the soldiers gone – apart, once again, from their presence on the page in Lyalls' poem. The poem plays with time, change and continuity. It sends us as adult readers back to our childhoods. With children, I suspect it breaks them out of their synchronic continuum – the state of permanent childhood, which I can never sort out clearly in mind is something we foist on children or  something they fight to preserve – and it brings them sharply into the diachronic continuum so brilliantly and amazingly presented to us of course, by Philippa herself with T*om's Midnight Garden*.

So, yes, popular philosophy too.

Something I like about Sidney's defence is that it appears to be talking about wisdom encapsulated in poetry. He talks of 'insights' and 'judgement' and 'learning'. I see literature as being in effect, 3000 years of wisdom about human behaviour put in a form that we can understand and take pleasure in. And yet, for some incredible reason, we have created an environment in some schools, in some classrooms (not all, please note) where the writing of summarisers, extract-hacks and writer-substitutes has been promoted above the level of those who've spent their whole lives trying to perfect ways of encapsulating wisdom and feeling into literary form. So not only do we get the banal re-writing of 'part of a myth' but we also get – and I'll hestitate to give the exact example -   people who produce school text-books on say, personal development, which include sessions on bereavement, anger, jealousy and the like but the writer of the lesson plans,  knowing that poetry often deals with this sort of thing, chooses not to find great poetry to stimulate talk about such things. Instead, she sticks in a bunch of poems of her own,  saying thereby, 'all that stuff written in the previous three thousand years won't be able to do its job better than me.'

So, I'm going to say that what poetry and all fictions do is encapsulate wisdom about human behaviour and they do this, as Sidney implies, by marrying ideas with feeling and putting them into sequences derived originally from experience and existence but which may also involve creatures and beings that have never been seen or heard of before.  And in the process of reading this, we will find out what it feels like to be someone facing danger or love or disaster or fun and the like. The poem or the story will do some experimenting for us.

Now, I would like to add on some more defences.

**'The Angler's Song' Jackie Kay p.127** ***A-Z***

Down where I am, my love, there is no love.
There is no light, no break of day, no rising sun.
Where I am, I call you in; I open my large mouth.
The only light down here comes from my body.

Down where I am is deeper than you imagine.
There is no food, no easy prey and it is freezing cold.
I sing to make you say my name. My big eyes weep.
This is the world of never-ending darkness, like pain.

Come down. I have been waiting for you a long time.
I wait without appearing to wait.
I see without being seen to see. You know me.
I am big-headed. I am hideous. I am ugly.

Come down. When I find you, I will bite into your belly.
What you see is what you get with me.
There is no other way. I will become you, let us say.
All that will be left of me will be my breathing.

Come down where I am. In and out, out and in.
Down at the very bottom of the deep dark sea.
When I become you, my mouth will stay open.
My open mouth like the river mouth down at the bottom.

Much of children's lives are circumscribed by explicit and implicit rules. These come ultimately from all the adults around them. No matter how hard we as adults try, we find it very difficult to grant children autonomy over parts of their own lives – even when there is no justification in an argument for health and safety, or psychological danger or whatever. I look at our new kitchen and realise that at present we've put a lot of things out of reach of the children. Is there any reason why children's shouldn't be able to get a bowl or a cup by themselves? Why have we built in dependence even into our kitchen?

I think poetry, when handled well, offers autonomy. It does this, I would argue, through several channels:

Suggestion
Reflection
Juxtaposition
Physicality of language
Mutability of language
And interculturalism

In Jackie Kay's poem, she writes:

> My sea bed. I tell no lies so your heart
> will not be broken. I offer nothing.

This is elliptical. We have no means to judge or determine exactly why the angler fish will tell no lies, why it will offer nothing. All we can do is infer and guess and wonder. We will occupy a space that is unfamiliar for many children, and yet it's one which is terribly important – a space where vague and indeterminate sensations are all we have to go on. Very often, for life to carry on, we can't assume that there are right and wrong answers. We have to figure out what other people's behaviour is about and for. And this sort of thing needs reflection.

And yet, it seems that for some children, some schools are forced into saying, in effect, 'there isn't time for reflection'. And I mean here the kind of reflection that looks at something, wonders about it, and hears a variety of voices alongside you that also wonder about it. I'm not such a poetry chauvinist that I think this can only come about through poetry. It can come about from a group of children looking at how a dandelion has grown between two cracks in the pavement. But poetry, nevertheless, does offer this potential.

> My sea bed. I tell no lies so your heart
> will not be broken. I offer nothing.
> All you will have is my breathing.
> But I will give myself up to you.
>
> I will give myself up for you.

The meaning of poetry does indeed often come to us musically – repetition being one of the musical cadences available to poets, but it also comes to us through the sideways process of juxtaposition. Here, Jackie Kay has juxtaposed the idea of a sea bed with 'no lies' with 'no heart broken' and then with nothingness being on offer. Then on to all that's being offered is breathing. Then on to the idea that the 'I' of the poem will give itself up to the 'you' of the poem. These six or so images aren't necessarily or easily linked. There are only two 'connectives', as the National Literacy Strategy called them – a 'so' and a 'but', but they don't really seem to help us in making a logical connection between things. But please note, extract-writers, comprehension question-setters, SATs-testers, logic is not what's going on here. The poem is forcing us to make connections simply by placing images side by side. I can't speak for people here, but by reading, re-reading, reading and thinking, I start to get a feeling about the angler-fish, perhaps a feeling about me. A feeling about saying things, through breathing and not talking. A feeling about trust, I think. In some kind of bed.

I'm going to make the claim that to go through this process in an open-ended way, in a co-operative way with people you trust – or entirely on your own – gives children - and all of us – a chance to investigate how and why, in daily life as lived, feelings and ideas are inseparable.

Moving on, Sidney also talked of poetry's music and proportion. And following that, I think in one respect, one side of poetry has a particular part to play in children's lives. It's in its physicality.

He had a little sticker
And he had a little ticket
And the took the little sticker
And he stuck it to the ticket.

Now he hasn't got a sticker
And he hasn't got a ticket
He's got a bit of both
Which he calls a little 'sticket'

They won't let you on the bus with a sticket.

Whatever else this poem does, it draws attention to something about the similarity of the words 'sticker', 'ticket', 'stuck' and 'sticket'. This runs across what language is thought to do, which is that it's there to convey meaning, as if words only exist to give you facts. In turns out, the poem conveys very little factual meaning apart from making a connection between words, as they say, at the level of the signifier. For children, this has a special role.

One of the important parts of being a child is hearing words, whether spoken directly to you, or spoken in the air, without knowing what they mean. Instead, all you hear is the word's physicality, its material existence, if you like – its sound, its tone, its pitch, its volume, its rhythm, its place in a cadence of words and the like. In this environment, such words exist as signifiers without signifying through what's been called the process of denoting. Instead, it conveys feeling through connoting – gathering up and delivering of the words' associations. And, as people like Julie Kristeva and Jacques Derrida have suggested, a lot of what's being connoted will be because of how one word sounds in relation to the similar sounding words around it.

Apart from poetry and song, there are very few, if any, outlets for children in schools, to explore this area of being, much of which must be tinged with anxiety. Think of how we feel when we travel to countries where we can't speak the language. Physical poetry like my sticker-ticket poem allows, I would suggest, a release through play, from some of that anxiety. It plays with words. Instead of treating words as sacrosanct little parcels of meaning, it offers relief from the relentless signifying of history, geography, maths, school rules, home rules and comprehension exercises about the Gorgons. It gives us all, but children in particular, a space in which to acknowledge with them the fact that language exists in its own right as a puzzling, peculiar set of phenomena just as rocks, birds and houses exist in their own right. Poetry is then also about language itself.

But there's more to this. When we show children words being physical, we also show them that language is mutable. It can be played with, according to patterns of sound in order sometimes to see what signifiers might spring up. And this is one of the bases of nonsense poetry which creates new worlds, just as Sidney described, often held together by recurring sounds, peopled by beings whose names, like Jumblies, Jabberwocks and Snarks half-echo previously heard places, people and creatures. Most of education travels in the opposite direction: it teaches correct usage, as handed down from those of us who know what correctness is. It teaches apposite and appropriate usage – le mot juste – whether that's in French, maths, history, school rules or wherever. A lot of poetry, in particular poetry for children, suggests that that correctness or appropriateness can be subverted and you, children, can if you want subvert it too.

> Ladles and jellyspoons,
>
> I come before you, to stand behind you,
> To tell you something I know nothing about.
>
> Next Thursday, which is Good Friday,
> There will be a mothers' meeting for fathers only.
> Admission is free, pay at the door,
> Pull up a seat and sit on the floor.
> We will be discussing the four corners of the round table.

Apart from anything else, this suggests that it's not only language that is something that you can play with, but so is the world.

And so to interculturalism.

Now, it's been argued that Sidney's 'Apology' was in part a defence of something specifically English – there hasn't been time to explore this. In place of this, I would want to pose a process that is rarely celebrated in relation to poetry. I would argue that no matter how we write, or even how we read, we do so with the culture we own, live with and live through. We cannot escape the processes ofacculturation that we have lived – food, language, gesture, frame of mind, habits – all of it and much more. Poetry can't escape it either. However, there is a theory around in education that knowledge and skills are value-free, that they aren't cultural – or if they are, there are some that are so absolute and universal we shouldn't waste our time describing them as being cultural.

Poetry doesn't waste much time doing this either. It just gets on and 'does' culture. It expresses the way we are, the way we live, the way we think. It offers this up in what are now (less so in Sidney's time) a huge range of forms – some very short, others long and expository. It can be imagistic or full of dialogue. It can be interior monologue, it can be narrative, or it can fight narrative and explore state of being and existence. It can draw attention to its writerliness by playing with words, or it can appear (though this will be an illusion) to be seamless with reality by being bald, concise and simple. All this makes it hugely various, open to choice by readers to find the shapes and forms that they want and like and indeed might want to adopt or adapt themselves.

More mutability.

**The Difference** p 211 A-Z

In Glasgow
the hotel gave us something called
'Soap'.
In Edinburgh
the hotel gave us the same stuff
and it was called:
'Skincare Bar'.

So, by scavenging around in the displayed words and detritus of human existence - itself an important process to show children - poetry can express how people define themselves or how others choose to define them. If we put that into an open-ended context of several or many people sharing ideas like this, poetry becomes intercultural. It shares.

I would suggest, (just as Sidney did in claiming a seriousness for poetry at the level of salvation) that in a way, interculturalism possesses the ingredients for a kind of salvation. Not heavenly, but earthly. I've seen children looking at pictures of refugees escaping the bombing of Barcelona in 1936 and then writing poems based on the idea that right now, they've got to leave and take with them important things, important memories, important wishes and desires. And then I've seen these children, some of them refugees themselves – from a wide range of faith and national backgrounds: Bangladesh, Nigeria, the

Caribbean, eastern Europe and the UK - share these around in a circle, talking of such intimate details as a hug from a grandmother or a look in someone's eyes. Whatever else we do to make the world safer and better, we will have to do quite a lot of this kind of sharing of feeling and understanding.

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Write4Children

# White Privilege and Children's Publishing: A Web 2.0 Case Study

**Laura Atkins**

Roehampton University

## Abstract

In this paper I look at recent controversies in the children's publishing world around race and representation, drawing partially from my own experience editing multicultural picture books in the United States. I address the question: How are non-white characters represented in the books published in the US, and how can this be directed by the editorial and publication process? First I share extracts of a paper on this topic that was posted on the web, and then interpret the comments and responses generated as a result, considering how new technologies enable broader debates and can instigate change.

**Keywords** Children's Publishing, Diversity, White Privilege, Multicultural, Web 2.0

*

This essay charts my journey into Web 2.0, the collaborative and interactive spaces on the internet, in an attempt to share my research on white privilege and the lack of diversity in children's publishing today. This is an area that has interested me for years, from my work as a children's book editor at two publishers of multicultural picture books in the United States, and through my continued research as an academic. But I have been concerned that publication and dissemination through purely academic channels can restrict the reach and impact of this work, as well as limiting those who are included in the debates I hope to encourage. So through this paper, I will share excerpts of the original paper which I delivered at the recent IRSCL congress, followed by the reactions to my posting of this paper on-line and the use of my blog for people to leave comments. This paper can be taken as a sort to case study for the use of the internet to disseminate and generate response. My interest in this whole process has been to share stories and help make voices heard that are often invisible or unreflected in mainstream publishing debates – though the growing blogosphere is shifting this dynamic. I also hope to reflect on the ways in which many children's books are published today in the US and the UK, and consider how this can affect the final products.

## Frankfurt Paper

I delivered the paper, 'What's the Story? Reflections on White Privilege in the Publication of Children's Books', to a primarily academic audience at the August 2009 IRSCL congress held in Frankfurt, Germany. Here is the majority of this presentation, though in the interests of space one section has been abbreviated. I will follow this with a summary and some analysis of the responses I got to this article once I published it on the internet.

[Beginning of Frankfurt Paper]
I've been thinking a lot about white privilege, thanks mostly to my friend Zetta Elliott who is mixed-race, a children's book author, an academic, and someone who is never afraid to speak her mind. This is also partially in light of the recent arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the distinguished African American academic from Harvard who was arrested after being suspected of breaking into his own home. The media in the US came alive, mainly with white reporters and radio djs defending the actions of the police. Once again, as with OJ Simpson, even Michael Jackson, there seems to be a divide between white and black responses to such events.

Zetta pointed me towards two white critics who discuss white privilege: Tim Wise and Peggy McIntosh. Both examine how white people are able to live their lives with unfair advantages, while having very little understanding of, or willingness to accept, that this white privilege exists. Wise created a three-act play on his blog showing how his interactions with police over his lifetime were based in a completely different dynamic than the one which most black people, particularly males, would most likely experience. For instance, when attempting to break into his car after he'd locked the keys inside, a policeman offered assistance rather than suspecting Wise of committing a crime. McIntosh has created a list of 46 circumstances in which white skin offers an unearned advantage, such as being able to choose the company of her own race most of the time, shopping without being followed by store detectives, and criticising the government without being seen as a cultural outsider.

This makes me think about my role as a white editor who has worked with non-white authors,[1] and it makes me consider my position as a white academic focusing on issues of diversity and representation. Zetta Elliott, on her provocative blog, said she was tired of having to explain racism to white people. And I admire these above critics for taking on that responsibility, for examining the place and role of white people in the dynamic of racism rather than always focusing on the people of colour.

And in the area of children's publishing, I have been disturbed by the recent controversy over the cover of a book called *Liar*, written by white Australian author Justine Larbalestier. In this case, American publisher Bloomsbury put a white girl's face on the cover of her book, even though the author has stated in her blog post about the cover that she meant the girl to be black – in fact, her inspiration was the dark-skinned, short haired Alana Beard, whose photo is included on her blog posting. Bloomsbury defended their decision by saying that the cover implied that the girl, a pathological liar, might even be lying about her race. The *Publishers Weekly* article which offered Bloomsbury's defense also disturbed me, with the lack of outrage, and the inclusion of comments from people who said they could understand why this cover, which they thought looked nice and was eye-catching, was chosen for the book. There was a huge outpouring of response on the blogosphere, neatly summarised by blogger Chasing Ray. But what of the mainstream, the media, the publishers themselves? It amazed me that the publisher would justify putting a white face on the cover of a book about black girl. Some have described the United States as being post-racial since the election of Barack Obama, but situations such as the Gates arrest and this book cover controversy convey quite the opposite.

From this I turn to my own experiences working in the children's publishing industry. I spent seven years in the US in editorial departments, particularly at independent publishers of multicultural children's books: Children's Book Press in San Francisco and Lee & Low Books in New York City where I was an editor. It was during this time that I experienced and started to question the role of the publishing industry, and particularly the author/editor relationship in the publication of 'multicultural' picture books, a term which, in the books I helped to develop, generally meant those written by non-white authors and reflecting the experiences of non-white children. I became aware, over time, of how my reaction to manuscripts was based within my background – class, race, education, and gender. I had certain expectations of the types of stories that were appropriate for children, ways of constructing a narrative, and content that was child-friendly. It was only in the context of working with authors from different backgrounds that these expectations were challenged, as when a Native American author explained to me that her story, in which a contemporary boy develops a conversational relationship with a rock, would not be considered 'fantasy' in her culture.

I also came to recognise the powerful force of market pressure on the juvenile publishing industry and the degree to which *perceived* market requirements shaped the books that were acquired and developed. The publishers where I worked sold primarily to the institutional markets – to teachers and librarians. In my experience, there was concern about what teachers or librarians would accept, with a frequent 'lowest common denominator' consideration of what the majority of those in the educational and library systems would tolerate.

The consequences of these sorts of decisions inevitably altered texts, often by making them conform to a more general market; one which represents the dominant and traditional expectations of children's literature. Twyla Hill describes this powerful role and its impact on the books produced:

> Publishers control the first gate in the production of children's books. Editors choose books to fit in with the past tradition of the house, current market conditions, and the mindset of that particular editor, all of which tends to make conventional books more publishable. (40)

The question here is not about particular racist individuals who work in the publishing industry, rather, this is an institutional problem. The way in which the acquisition, development, distribution and marketing of children's books currently takes place is a system based on patterns that are so pervasive they seem to become natural, inevitable and justifiable. I would argue that most children's publishing houses currently exist in order to serve the interests and needs of the white majority culture.

From here, I want to give a fairly detailed example of one of the books I edited, showing what types of changes were made and why, as well as reflecting on how I see this process affecting the final product. I will then draw from one of the interviews I carried out with UK non-white authors and editors to elaborate on some of the issues raised.

## DeShawn Days

*DeShawn Days*[2] was the first book I worked on as an editor at Lee & Low Books, and I want to look particularly at how the experience the author aimed to reflect was shifted by the publication process. The author, Tony Medina, initially submitted a few poems representing the life of a ten-year-old boy living in housing projects. When I wrote to say I was interested in seeing more, he sent many additional poems (far more than could fit in a 32 page picture book), and he and I worked together to select the poems for inclusion and decide on an order. Medina, who is African American and of Puerto Rican descent, grew up in the projects in the Bronx, and was living in Harlem when we worked on this book. As a politically-engaged performance poet, his aim was to write a book that honestly spoke to, and reflected the lives of, children living in inner-city projects.When I showed this project to others at Lee & Low Books (particularly the Managing Editor and the Publisher), there was a lot of discussion about the tone and darkness in the book. And I was asked to go back to the author and request various changes. The first was to come up with an alternative to Medina's original title, *DeShawn's Dilemma*, as it was seen as potentially too negative, and perhaps too complex or unclear for young readers.

It was also suggested that the author remove a poem in which DeShawn has an asthma attack and goes to the hospital, as there was concern it meant the overall balance of the poems was too negative. I was asked to request that Medina replace it with a positive and celebratory poem about his neighbourhood.

Here is an excerpt from the poem 'I Love My Block' which Medina wrote to replace the poem, 'When I Get Asthma':

> I love my block
> And playing with my friends
>
> In front of our building
> the girls play double dutch
> jumping fast and high
>
> While us boys play skellies
> with shaving cream tops and
> different colour clay inside
>
> We play hopscotch, cops and
> robbers, and hide-and-seek too
>
> We always think of fun things to do!... (23)

This poem still feels true to Medina's voice, but I don't think it is one of the stronger poems in the book as it lacks some of the complexity of theme and tone found in the other poems (such as those about loving rap music, watching the news, or having a nightmare about graffiti).

South Bronx community activist Majora Carter has stated that, due to pollution and industrialization, 'On average, 25 percent of our kids have asthma. Our child asthma hospitalization rate is between four and seven times the national average'. The poem focusing on DeShawn's asthma attack would have provided an opportunity for those children to see that experience reflected in a book – both normalising it, and perhaps also providing an opportunity for those children to discuss the disease and its place in their community. Instead, a more generic and celebratory poem was inserted.

Another situation revealed the difficulty in creating an insider's perspective on this experience for a general readership. In the case of a poem entitled 'What is Life Like in the 'Hood?', which describes the neighbourhood where DeShawn lives, the words: 'crack vials everywhere' (8) were seen as problematic. The Publisher felt strongly that the mention of crack should not be included in a picture book, that this would cause teachers or librarians not to buy it. With initial resistance from the author, he eventually changed that phrase to 'People walking everywhere' (8).

For the author, seeing crack vials in the neighbourhood was part of the normal experience for most children where he lived. He didn't see it as being controversial or too upsetting to urban children for whom it was part of daily life. But the publisher was concerned about how teachers and librarians might perceive it, particularly teachers and librarians working with populations who were not living in urban, inner-city areas.

In looking at picture books about controversial topics (and specifically a book about drug addiction called *The House that Crack Built*), Dianne Koehnecke writes about different schools' responses to the book: 'Maughan's research showed that people in suburban neighbourhoods tend to find the book appropriate for junior or senior high school students, while those in urban settings think children as young as first grade need exposure to the story' (25).

This statement gets to the heart of the issues that drove editorial development for *DeShawn Days*. The author had grown up in a situation similar to that described in the book. His belief was that children living in this environment needed to see their reality accurately represented in children's books, while children who did not come from this experience should not be overly-protected from the realities of this world. However, as Koehnecke writes, teachers in different environments have very different conceptions of what is appropriate for children and at what age. Teachers are one of the primary consumers for whom publishers such as Lee & Low are producing their books, and so they are cautious about not offending or upsetting those who might be uncomfortable with this type of book content.

These examples reflect the difficulties in showing a particular experience from the inside, fully reflecting the child's life as the author intended to, within the mainstream publishing environment. In this case, showing the world from the perspective of a boy living in inner city housing projects, including the reality of encountering crack vials as a normal part of life and exploring the reality of so many children suffering from asthma, were deemed intolerable to a majority of the teachers and librarians who would be the book's consumers – reflecting a conservative, white middle class expectation of what is acceptable in children's books. And this was in a small, multicultural publishing house – so imagine how this might take place in larger publishers which have less overt concern about diversity and representation in the books they publish.

## Walking A Tightrope

[This section of this paper focused on one of several interviews I carried out with non-white authors and editors who had worked with non-white authors in the UK from the 1970s to the early 2000s, with an interest in exploring this issue further. I spoke with Rehana Ahmed, who was asked to edit an anthology for Macmillan Publishing featuring stories for teens by south Asian writers. Ahmed, who is half white British and half Pakistani, was selected as she had children's editorial experience, and at the time was writing her PhD in postcolonial studies. I discussed her experience with the title of this book. When Macmillan sent her proofs, they had mistakenly written the title as *Walking **the** Tightrope* instead of *Walking **a** Tightrope*. Ahmed complained, feeling that the mistake implied there was an essential British Asian experience, when her intent was to show a wide range of experiences through the selected stories. She met resistance, and eventually had to say she would distance herself from the title if they would not make the correction. At this point, it was finally changed back to the original.]

Ahmed said that the editorial department at Macmillan was mostly white, but then her white friends recognised the problem with the title. In this case, and in the case of the *Liar* cover mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it is a lack of understanding, and blindness to the white cultural insularity of the publishing context that is at issue. Lee & Low, where I edited *DeShawn Days*, is owned and managed by Chinese Americans, so this in many ways goes beyond colour – it is the problem of a deeply engrained culture of publishing, of distribution networks, of the perceived market. Larbalestier, in her blog entry, claims that 'Since I've told publishing friends how upset I am with my *Liar* cover, I have been hearing anecdotes from every single house about how hard it is to push through covers with people of colour on them'. She goes on,

> The notion that 'black books' don't sell is pervasive at every level of publishing. Yet I have found few examples of books with a person of colour on the cover that have had the full weight of a publishing house behind them.

There are too many things wrong here, and it seems like too few people see it. The children's publishing industry can be blind, insular, and self-enclosed in too many ways. Yes, many good and well-intentioned people work in the industry, and most desire to make things better, to provide all children with wonderful books to read. But this is such a fundamental problem based on who primarily works in the industry, and even more so who holds the positions of power and dictates marketing and publication decisions.

Perhaps self-publishing will be the way forward, the internet, the ability of people to bypass an archaic publishing industry that seems slow to respond to change. Though currently, self-published books lack the legitimacy that most children's book buyers perceive from books that come out of publishing houses. At the Diversity Matters conference held in London in 2006, Francesca Dow of Puffin said that by 2010, 1 in 5 schoolchildren in the UK will be from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. The United States grows more and more diverse as well, with a mixture of stories, backgrounds, ways of telling. It's such an enormous shame that these voices and stories are mostly unheard and unpublished, and that those which do come through struggle to carry their original nuance and address.

As I had originally written this paper, I was going to end by asking what we could do, as individuals and collectively, to help to change the way children's books are published. And on a few night before the congress I received the *PW Children's Bookshelf* email, to find that Bloomsbury had finally decided to change the cover of the book. Here is Bloomsbury's statement about this decision:

> We regret that our original creative direction for *Liar* – which was intended to symbolically reflect the narrator's complex psychological makeup – has been interpreted by some as a calculated decision to mask the character's ethnicity. In response to this concern, and in support of the author's vision for the novel, Bloomsbury has decided to re-jacket the hardcover edition with a new look in time for its publication in October. It is our hope that the important discussions about race and its representation in teen literature continue. As the publisher of *Liar*, we also hope that nothing further distracts from the quality of the author's nuanced and accomplished story, and that a new cover will allow this novel's many advocates to celebrate its U.S. publication without reservation.

Which allows me to close on a more positive note. This does not mean that the problem is solved, and there is still the issue that the girl is lighter-skinned and more girly or traditionally 'pretty' than the author seemed to intend. But in this case, a public outcry and the power of the internet pushed a publisher to make a change, at an estimated cost of around $7,000 to rejacket 100,000 books. Perhaps the tide is turning, and there are too many people paying attention for this level of outright racism to continue to exist. We'll have to keep watching and speaking out.
[End Frankfurt Paper]

## The Web 2.0 Experience

Following the congress, I posted this paper on-line using a dedicated website (http://sites.google.com/site/tockla/), and publicised this on my blog and through children's literature listserves such as Child-lit and the Children's Literature UK Academic Discussion list. I also used Facebook to try to attract people. My hope was to have input from aspiring and published authors, as well as from people who worked in publishing – hopefully to generate a larger discussion on this topic. I received twenty comments on my blog (all of which can be read in full here: www.lauraatkins.com/blog/2009/08/paper-from-irscl-conference-on-white_14.html). I want to summarise some of these responses, and reflect on the process of using the interactivity available through the internet for this discussion.

First, I sent the paper to author Tony Medina to get his response. I posted his comments in full on the website after the paper, but in the interests of space, I will summarise what he wrote. He wanted to correct some inaccuracies, as he saw them. He felt the inclusion of the poem, 'I Love My Block' was necessary to balance the narrative 'away from being overly sad and depressing', and that it connects to many people's love for, and pride in, their neighbourhood. He wrote, 'So, I really think it was a sensible inclusion that provided balance and accuracy with regard to DeShawn's experience (nay, the experience of those from 'hoods all over the world)'.

He also wrote that the words changed from crack vials were 'broken bottles' – which is a different recollection than I have of the change that was made. He wrote that, while he was unhappy at the time about the change, he now feels it is more nuanced (broken bottles are more prevalent than crack vials). He also wrote: 'White teacher and librarians are not the only one that would find the use of crack vials offensive. Black folks would as well'. He cites examples of Langston Hughes who was criticised by W.E.B. DuBois for showing the negative sides of black culture (prostitution, drunks, etc.).

This reveals one of the issues with this sort of project: our different memories of what happened during the editorial process, and different perspectives on the changes that were made. Medina is the author of the book, and I am relieved to know that he ended up feeling that these editorial changes improved the book and carried the message that he wished to convey (something that wasn't so clear during the editorial development process). I also felt it was important to add his voice to the discussion – representing his experience and perspective. But I still feel that the insight into the types of changesmade is important, as it shows the kinds of pressures that can come into play during the editorial process and allows those not involved a deeper understanding of how book development can happen.

From the twenty other comments I received, most were from aspiring or published authors (none were from people who work in publishing). One important contribution, in light of my position as a white person talking about these issues, was comments from non-white people giving their perspectives on this subject.

Author Catherine Johnson wrote, 'It does need discussion and thanks for drawing attention to it. It's important there are white people doing this because otherwise it does begin to feel like we are just being chippy – or rather we are told we are…'

An aspiring author wrote an email to me, and allowed me to post her comments after I had removed any potentially identifying features. This, I think, shows the level of concern people have in talking about these issues publicly, and the sense that an aspiring author might suffer for speaking out on this subject. This person wrote:

> I read your article with interest but I didn't feel I could comment publicly on the blog as my novels are yet unpublished and I don't want to compromise my chances with a public comment [….] My two novels have been doing the rounds of publishers for 18 months now without success to my agent's puzzlement (my agent is [a very reputable agent]) […. ][Name of large publishing house] responded to our submission by saying, 'This is a strong novel, but it would compete with the work of our other authors [...] [Name of established white author] already writes about [a continent, not Asia]'. My novels are set in southeast Asia which is on the other side of the world to [above continent]. It makes me think that my ethnicity and the fact that my books are set in other countries lumps me into a vague category – the third world stuff category – which is already dominated by authors like [above-mentioned white author].

These two comments, from a published and an aspiring author who are both not white, reflect the challenges they feel they face. Catherine Johnson mentions the impression of being 'chippy' if a non-white authors speaks out. The anonymous aspiring author makes this point even more clearly, in her fear of being seen as critical while making the valid complaint that an established white author, writing about a non-western culture, is being used as an excuse not to publish her book set in a totally different country and written from a cultural insider's perspective. These are problematic issues when looking at race and white privilege, especially in light of a publishing industry that can be anything other than transparent; where it is difficult for people to know what drives editorial and marketing decisions.

Another aspect I became aware of through posting this paper and the comments which followed is the dialogue and intertextual relationship these postings can engage in. Author Leila Rasheed left her comment:

> I am half English and half Bangladeshi and write books for children. Basically my response to your article is OMG, you are so right and thank heavens someone is saying something about it. The children's publishing industry in the UK at any rate (don't know anything about the US) is highly biased towards the perceived needs of white, middle class people.

She followed this comment with a link to a posting she had written on her blog about why "…although I'm half Asian, half British, all my main characters are plain white." In this entry she offers an honest and raw exploration for why this might be the case – mostly due to her childhood reading about Asian characters, who were primarily living in poverty and dealing with racism. She wrote about her challenges in trying to envision an entertaining children's story featuring a non-white protagonist. This link to her entry, which she provided as part of her comment on my blog, was written before mine, and in dialogueue it added depth to my examples and argument, and took it in a different direction. The same was true with academic Sarah Park's blog posting about interracial adoption, which she wrote in response to my essay. Here Park wrote about the lack of children's books that explore the troubles that can exist when children are adopted from outside of their race or cultural background. So again, the 'conversation' between my blog and hers took my ideas in a distinct, and to me unanticipated, direction.

Comments also pushed more deeply into aspects of what I had started to explore. For instance, author Neesha Meminger brought up the concept of aesthetics in relation to the publishing industry; a topic she had already addressed in her blog. I am going to quote her at length as I feel that she, in many ways, got at the essence of what I was trying to explore . She wrote,

> Laura, this is a fantastic post. I especially love the idea that in the Native American tradition, a boy having an ongoing conversation with a rock would not be considered fantasy.
>
> To me, this is so key to the way the publishing industry is set up. It leans toward ONE particular aesthetic and set of values, and posits them as THE aesthetic and set of values. This was the impetus behind my post on aesthetics within publishing, and I truly hope more editors and publishers join the conversation about diversity within children's publishing. It's not as simple as having White authors write the books they would write anyway, then changing their names to obviously "ethnic" names and making the characters PoC [people of colour]. That *still* erases the experience of PoC.
>
> I also appreciate you sharing your experience with editing Medina's book. While I fully understand his follow-up comment and that he felt the edits made his book stronger; I also see it within the context of a larger publishing machine that tends to push for homogeneity and caters to the needs of the market – which is not always the children who would benefit most from having their *true* realities reflected within the pages of a book.
>
> All of this "softening and prettying up" of a painful experience smacks of the images we see every day of PoC – images that are lightened, noses that are air-brushed to be straighter, women's legs made to look longer, etc. in magazines and on billboards. These images are simply not true reflections and they contribute to the erosion of self-esteem in children who never see themselves and their lives accurately represented. They see that they do not exist, or the way that they exist is not acceptable or worth representation.
>
> We have a long way to go, but I'm hopeful that through connection, dialogueue, and a willingness to engage, we're on our way to a more accurate representation of the world we live in, and the children

who need our stories.

Since working on this project, I have become a much more active follower of the kidlit ‘blogosphere’, especially following bloggers who focus on this topic. I have discovered that there is a large, multifaceted conversation that is constantly shifting and blending, with different people entering and leaving the fray. Recently there has been another controversy as Bloomsbury once again published a book featuring a young woman with ‘dark skin’ using a photograph of a very white-looking girl on the cover (*Magic Under the Glass* by Jaclyn Dolamore). And again, after an outcry developed on the blogosphere, they have decided to change the cover. The same has happened with another book, *The Mysterious Benedict Society series* by Trenton Lee Stuart and published by Little Brown. In this case a mixed-race boy was illustrated as white on the front cover, and Little Brown have said they will change the covers. A new Facebook group, ‘Readers Against Whitewashing’ was founded in January 2010, bringing together blog postings, articles and news on the subject. So that’s three times in the last year that publishers have changed covers based on blogger response. What seems to be missing is a clear and transparent response from people who work in publishing.

So what did I learn from this Web 2.0 experience? I see the potential in this huge conversation to bring attention to issues that otherwise haven’t received such sustained focus; to bring people together to become a much more visible force; and to ultimately, sometimes, change policies and publishing decisions. This interactive space is as powerful, and as chaotic, as any place where huge numbers of people gather. But it is a space where I will continue to spend time, and when possible, to participate and add my voice on this subject. I believe that sharing academic research in this more informal context can be a valuable way to increase the possible impact of our work.

## Notes

1. First note. Regarding terminology, ‘people of colour’ is the generally accepted way of describing people who aren’t white in the United States. This term is not familiar in the UK, and “non-white” tends to be the norm. While problematic by defining people by what they are not, and still using white as the norm, I mainly use this unsatisfying term in this essay.
2. Second note. I have written more extensively about this book’s development in two other published articles, cited at the end of this essay.

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## Biography

Laura Atkins worked for almost a decade in the children's publishing industry in the United States, primarily developing multicultural picture books which have won a variety of honors, including the Coretta Scott King Award. She completed her MA in children's literature at the University of Roehampton in London where she is now a lecturer at the National Centre for Research in Children’s Literature (NCRCL). She is also a freelance children’s literature specialist who runs writing workshops, offers manuscript critiquing, and acts as a freelance editor.

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**Printable version**

Write4Children

# Many leagues behind: Researching the history of fiction for YA girls

**Bridget Carrington**

Roehampton University

## Abstract

This paper considers the early history of the development of fiction for adolescent and Young Adult girls, an area which has received little attention. Its focus is on selected novels published between 1750 and 1890 which were read by unmarried girls in their teenage years and early twenties, or recommended for them by educationalists and critics. It considers why girls read these novels, and how the texts address the themes identified by twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorists of children's literature as identifiers of fiction for young adults. Primary evidence is drawn from reading records and critical surveys made between the mid-eighteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Key Words** YA girls, YA fiction, history of children's literature, epistolary novel, gothic novel, sensation novel

*

> …[Y]oung adult literature…is surely as conspicuously orphaned as that cultural experience of adolescence which generates it… If children's literature has advanced beyond marginality as a field of scholarly inquiry, adolescent literature remains many leagues behind.
>
> (Myers, 1989:22)

## Why?

In writing this article, I hope I can persuade readers that the history of fiction for young adults in general, and for girls in particular, stretches back far further than is usually credited.

While undertaking my MA with the University of Surrey Roehampton ten years ago, I researched a forgotten nineteenth-century children's author called Flora Shaw, whose total fiction output amounted to five novels. The content of the first two showed that they were written for children, but the later three increasingly addressed an older readership, adolescents and finally, in *Colonel Cheswick's Campaign*, Young Adult girls facing the uncertainties of relationships, marriage, home-making and motherhood. This seemed to fall within the parameters of what we would now term a 'YA' (Young Adult) novel, but every written authority I consulted dated YA novels as a post 1930s phenomenon. My evidence showed this to be unlikely, and so I set out in my PhD research to show that Young Adult girls were reading fiction specifically suited to their young adult concerns as early as the 1750s. My purpose was to consider the themes and issues common to young adults across the centuries, and to identify fiction which addressed them. These issues relate to approaching maturity, and the societal expectations placed upon a Young Adult girl by the ideology of her time, which may be at odds with her own ambitions. Identity is a key issue, and the novels commonly feature the struggles of teenage girls, or those in their early twenties, to come to terms with their future role in society. I set my start date of 1750 to encompass the decade in which the earliest novel containing YA identifiers for which I could clearly identify a YA readership was published. The end-date, 1890, was chosen as the point at which publishers had become very aware of the increasingly literate YA female market now available, and were therefore rapidly expanding their lists.

In the twenty years since the children's literature historian and scholar Mitzi Myers made the assessment quoted above at the head of my article, the status of the *modern* novel for young adults has risen. Nevertheless Robert Bator's statement, made in 1987 and quoted by Myers, that 'a literature designed for the teenaged market was a 1930s phenomenon. . . . nothing specifically penned for adolescents existed before' (24), remains a bafflingly common perception. Despite the constant republication of nineteenth-century fiction for girls, particularly from the trans-Atlantic genre which introduced us to Louisa Alcott's March girls and Susan Coolidge's Carr family, and the explosion of girls' school stories in Britain after 1890, many scholars of children's literature continue to regard the novel for young adults as a modern phenomenon. Typical of this view is the *Cambridge Guide to Children's Literature in English* (2001), which includes an article by Kate Agnew and Maureen Nimon on 'Young Adult Fiction' which begins '[a]s a genre young adult fiction did not exist until well after World War II' (775).

In writing *Paths of Virtue?*, I sought to challenge this view by investigating historical perceptions of female adolescence and young adulthood, suggesting appropriate critical viewpoints, discussing commonly accepted identifiers of fiction for young adults, and, in the light of these, examining key texts written in Britain between 1750 and 1890, and for which there is evidence that they were widely recommended for or read by Young Adult girls. The social, psychological and sexual concerns of the Young Adult girl between 1750 and 1890 were in no way fundamentally different from those of her modern counterpart. As became clear in the course of my research, the basic issues for which girls have sought guidance in their teenage years and early twenties remain unchanged.

## What had others said?

In order to locate my study within the body of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century work on young adults and their literature, I considered some of the relevant critical and historical texts published about the sociology of youth and about children's literature in the last thirty years. Like Myers we may deplore the androcentric concentration of earlier historical overviews but must nevertheless acknowledge that writers such as Spacks and Dyhouse, both of whom published in 1981, had already begun to focus on the difference in maturational experience for *girls*, compared with that of boys. Subsequent critical examinations extended this to literature, including Rowbotham's study of advice in Victorian literature, Mitchell's examination of the change in girls' culture between 1880 and 1915, Vallone's detailed survey of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century girls' culture in Britain and America, O'Keefe on late nineteenth- and twentieth-century US girls' books and Driscoll, who provides a wider sociological view of 'feminine adolescence in popular culture and cultural theory', and offers within it a brief survey of the history of adolescence. Driscoll argues the case for a changing historical perception of what she terms 'feminine' adolescence. Adapting a phrase coined by Juliana Horatia Ewing in 1876 and echoing the title of Henry James' 1899 novel, Bilston takes *The Awkward Age in Women's Popular Fiction* (2004) as the subject of her examination of the textual portrayal of girls and the transition to womanhood between 1850 and 1900. She centres her argument on those texts which highlight a later Victorian emphasis on female adolescence as an overtly traumatic experience.

Two especially significant scholarly works in any historically-based consideration of the development of a body of fiction for Young Adult girls are the analyses of reading by women and girls by Kate Flint in *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (1993) and by Jacqueline Pearson in *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835* (1999). These are studies consistent with the critical approaches which informed my own research, especially reader-response and book-history theories. Both Flint and Pearson powerfully argue the crucial interrelationship between the reader, text, author and publisher/marketer. Each considers not merely women's reading but also *girls*' reading, and bases her argument on reading records, on critical response, and on marketing data contemporaneous with the periods covered by their studies, as well as on evidence within the novels being read.

## Practical Organisation

My study was organized in two parts: a theoretical overview laying out the background to the focus of my argument, followed by a detailed examination of five texts which are constantly cited in the reading recorded by Young adult girls: Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54), Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778), Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and the text which prompted my current research, Flora Louisa Shaw's *Colonel Cheswick's Campaign* (1886).

I first considered the historical development of a consciousness of adolescence and young adulthood, identifying the issues common to all young people, and those specific to girls. In the course of my argument I proposed that there exists a greater uniformity in the historical recognition of the characteristics of a Young Adult girl than has been commonly recognized. I then briefly outlined the relevance of reader-response theory, cultural materialism and book-history theory to my approach. Part II was presented historically, to show how each genre – epistolary, Gothic, sensation and Victorian Imperialism – addressed the issues of its young readers within the ideological philosophy of its time. I also discussed how the young women at the centre of each text challenge, modify, and sometimes displace those ideological expectations, and how the new expectations held by each generation of young female readers influenced the writers and succeeding texts. I examined the records in diaries and other primary evidence which identifies the fiction which girls were reading, and then analyzed the ways in which the selected texts by Richardson and Burney display the identifiers of Young Adult fiction and their messages for girl readers. A similar approach was made to Ann Radcliffe's novel, showing how the

Gothic genre addressed anew the concerns of its Young Adult female audience. The rise of the sensation novel in the mid-nineteenth century was considered in relation to the popularity among Young Adult girls of specific novels by Wood and Braddon, each somewhat atypical of the genre because of the retribution received by their heroines . The detailed textual examinations finished with Shaw's long-forgotten late-Victorian novel, which was critically acclaimed in its day but already too old-fashioned to attract a continuing readership.

I therefore centred my research not on the texts usually recognized as 'children's literature', but on six novels within the wider body of fiction, which nevertheless were clearly intended to delineate the paths of virtue for their Young Adult female readers, each novel encapsulating both the maturational concerns of this readership and the ideology of its time. None of the first five of these authors, Richardson, Burney, Radcliffe, Wood and Braddon, nor the particular novels chosen for examination is now specifically identified as written for young people, yet they are identified as favourite reading by some of those girls themselves in their diaries and letters. Five of the six novels were written by women, engaging in what Myers termed the tradition of 'matriachal' writing which emerged in the eighteenth century, designed to provide 'realistic adolescent socialization' (Myers, quoted by Rowe, in Ruwe, 2004) for young women through fiction as well as through instructional manuals. Intriguingly it emerged that Richardson, the single male author whose novels I discussed, had as a young man acquired the interest and insight which equipped him to write fiction particularly appropriate to, and enjoyed by, a Young Adult female audience by providing a letter-writing service for young women.

In researching my subject it became clear that although the physiological and psychological bases for identifying adolescence as a distinct maturational phase were codifed as late as 1904 (by Hall), the recognition of a post-childhood but pre-adult state is evidenced as early as the fourteenth century, in the activities surrounding apprenticeship. Moreover, although it is principally male experience which is recorded, there is evidence that a type of behaviour characteristic of Young Adult girls was acknowledged not only through the instructional writing produced in successive centuries for young people. We see this 'awkward age' in the fictional portraits of unruly, unhappy or uncertain eighteenth- and nineteenth-century young women such as Richardson's Harriet Byron, Burney's Evelina, Radcliffe's Adeline or Shaw's Ailsa, as well as in the anti-heroines of Wood and Braddon. These fictional young women are all seeking reassurance about their concerns about identity and relationships, and their future role in society.

The title of my work, 'Paths of Virtue?', was taken from a 250-page condensation of Richardson's novels *Pamela* (2 volumes, 1740), *Clarissa* (7 volumes, 1747-48) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (7 volumes, 1753-54), made in 1756. This small single volume, *The Paths of Virtue Delineated*, anonymously 'familiarised and adapted to the capacities of youth', is prefaced by half a dozen pages recommending its role in instilling religion and virtue, and 'teaching the young inexperienced heart to govern its passions; to regulate its desires and pursuits after happiness' (1974:iii).

**Sources and evidence: readers, who and why?**

The inspiration for my investigation into the early history of a literature for Young Adult girls lay in the choices made by some of those girls themselves, as distinct from those novels recommended as suitable reading by the guardians of their educational and social well-being. Several of the texts most popular with Young Adult girls, though considered unsuitable reading by their adult mentors, address their young readers' concerns about female maturation (principally inter-generational relationships, romance and identity) as seriously as any book of instruction, and far more accessibly. These novels do indeed indicate the paths of virtue, demonstrably delineated for the enjoyment of their audience. Shaw's *Colonel Cheswick's Campaign* (1886), seems never to have achieved this popularity, although widely recommended in the press, and despite addressing typically Young Adult female concerns as well as conveying late Victorian ideological messages to its readers. My choice of Shaw's novel was also made to demonstrate that, although it fulfilled the criteria I identified as signifiers of texts written for a Young Adult female readership, by 1886 the girls themselves were discovering a new independence and widening horizons for their life-choices. Although Shaw's heroine would like to become a doctor, after considerable psychological turmoil, her eventual choice is not a career but marriage.

Unfortunately for Shaw, at the very moment when she focused on writing for Young Adult girls, shifting her emphasis away from her earlier books for children, school, career and adventure stories particularly suited to an increasingly independent female teenage audience, by writers such as L.T. Meade and Bessie Marchant, became widely and cheaply available in the libraries and bookshops. For late Victorian middle-class girls a university education and a career were becoming a real possibility. Increasingly, for them the 'paths of virtue' needed to be found in a wider world, and their choice of fiction-reading expanded to embrace and encourage a new genre of texts for Young Adult girls. These books reflected the aspirations and expectations of a new generation for whom an acceptable and successful future did not inevitably mean marriage and motherhood. Unlike the earlier history of literature for Young Adult girls, the proliferation of writers and titles which emerged after 1880 for that market have been the subject of considerable scholarly attention.

The ability offered by fiction successfully to encounter, control and overcome the fears associated with the move from pre-adulthood into maturity is dependent on the reader responding to and interacting with the text. While the epistolary novel immersed its readers in the minutiae and immediacy of its action, female writers of Gothic novels provided opportunities for a more active involvement, a possibility to carry their Young Adult readers along with their Young Adult heroine to face mystery, terror (and sexual harassment) before revealing the complex but inevitably rational solution to some of their problems. With the development of the sensation novel readers followed a pattern of clue and detection from which they could endeavour to reach their own solution to the plotted mystery. In East Lynne Young Adult girl readers could follow the progress of infatuation, of love, of passion, despair and resolution through the experiences of its female protagonists as their lives are affected by the unravelling of a murder plot. Similarly Lady Audley's secret is gradually revealed to them as they interpret the clues within the text, allowing the opportunity to acquire not only the skills to solve a fictional mystery, but to 'read' and act upon those clues which could allow them to make their own appropriate life-choices.

By the 1880s these life-choices, widening beyond the role of the perfect wife and mother – the 'angel in the house' – needed representation in novels which could expand the horizons of their young female readers. However well-recommended and publicised, and however engaging the plot, many young women were no longer satisfied with the future offered them in ideologically-conservative novels such as *Colonel Cheswick's Campaign*. The willingness of the British 'New Girl' to sit at home and await the return of her soldier lover or husband to support her nation's imperialist aspirations was decreasing. Instead she wanted an active role, for example as a nurse, a doctor (Ailsa's future of choice) or, like Shaw herself, a foreign correspondent. Accordingly, from the 1880s onwards stories for teenage girls proliferated, in economically-priced series such as Humphrey Milford's 'The Girl's New Library', increasingly focusing on school, college and career rather than merely romance and marriage. Angela Brazil, whom Cadogan and Craig call 'the chronicler *par excellence* of schoolgirls' adventures' (1986:49), published her first title in 1906, following it with a further fifty by 1947. The Great War further increased opportunities and independence for young women, in addition to severely depleting the numbers of marriageable young men. From 1918 school series, aimed at younger teenagers, flourished, while for Young Adult girls, college and career stories offered an insight into new alternatives to marriage, options further extended by the Second World War.

It became clear to me through my research that while society, ideology and expectations alter over the centuries, the issues which can confuse and concern that group of readers appear to change little. In their pursuit of inner selfhood and a public identity, in their need to know how to establish and retain relationships with society in general, and with family in particular, and in their desire for romance and fulfilment they benefit from accessible and credible role models. For those girls who could read, in 1750 those from a more affluent and/or educated background, by 1890 an ever-increasing number from more varied social groups, fiction could provide that advice and those role-models. Richardson, Burney, Radcliffe, Wood, Braddon and Shaw adapted their genres to engage and advise girls approaching adulthood. When Hardy's Tess claims that '[l]adies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks' (1994:104), we may doubt that those who did not read novels were ignorant of the dangers which they might encounter. What we cannot doubt is that through their fiction these authors offered a means by which Young Adult girls might more confidently face their future.

## What did my research add to existing knowledge?

It was clear that from 1750 to 1890 Young Adult girls read novels which could offer them the vicarious experience of passing from an inexperienced immaturity towards an adulthood in which the selfhood of female protagonists, their relationships to family, lovers, to the prevailing ideology and to society are resolved. It is evident that what girls read sometimes conflicted with what girls were told to read. In the course of my research it emerged that even Richardson was disapproved of by Catherine Macaulay, while Hannah More railed against 'seducing books'. Nevertheless it seems that Young Adult girls sought them, and therefore writers incorporated advice into entertaining, engaging and overtly pleasurable texts. Undeterred by the warnings constantly issued by the parents, educationalists and critics of their time against 'frivolous reading', it is evident that these girls read novels, and that some read avidly. Within those novels for which I identified a substantial Young Adult female readership it seems those girls sought and certainly could find advice *designed* by writers to aid their readers', particularly their young female readers', life-choices.

Writing about Maria Edgeworth's 'Angelina', one of her *Moral Tales for Young People* (1801), Mitzi Myers suggested that an 'educative fiction' (1989:31) for teenagers emerged in this book. Myers asserts that, '[n]o matter how "new realistic" modern young adult fiction gets, it always subsumes within its grittiness some of the romance that is part of our cultural construction of adolescence' (32)As the overall title of the collection indicates, Edgeworth was writing 'for Young People', and in 'Angelina' offers a strategy for girls led astray by their novel reading. As interesting as her young readers might have found these tales, we may surmise that their curiosity about life typical of Young Adult girls encouraged them to seek novels through which they might attempt to satisfy their concerns about adult life in greater depth.

The primary evidence of Young Adult girls reading reflects through successive centuries not only the ideology derived from the socio-political background of their times, but also an opportunity to formulate their own responses through an interpretation of fictional texts. It is clear that this in turn influenced the authors and the publishers who sought to provide the material, the *Bildungromans*, by means of which this young female audience might negotiate their own journey to adulthood. The popularity of subscription and circulating libraries in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the development of publishers' lists categorizing this type of novel as a 'Young Lady's Library' in the later nineteenth century both reveal the extent to which the succeeding generations apparently sought and were supplied with these novels, their access increasing as the access to education improved for what Samuel Johnson termed 'common reader'. Following the influence which eighteenth-century educationalists attempted to bring to bear on girls' reading, nineteenth-century critics sought also to analyse the reading popular with this audience, an approach extended retrospectively and with a wider remit by twentieth-century and later theorists and historians of reading practice.

Examining the specific texts read and recommended revealed not only the extent to which these novels may be seen to be, in Smollett's words, 'inlisting the passions on the side of virtue', but also the skill of each author in transmitting social instruction by '[t]he imaginative application of the narrative mode' providing for readers both 'good stories', and 'gripping drama' (Bruner, 1986:13). Some of these novels, notably *Sir Charles Grandison* and *East Lynne*, remained the favourite reading of several generations of Young Adult girls, though they increasingly sought fiction which addressed their greater independence. It is perhaps the Gothic novel which continues particularly to engage Young Adult girls today, both in its earliest form, for example *The Romance of the Forest*, and in early parody such as Austen's *Northanger Abbey* 1818). In the later nineteenth century it flourished particularly in short-story format, with notable female exponents such as Charlotte Perkins and Edith Nesbit. We may also observe it alive and well in countless twentieth- and twenty-first-century reinventions, morphing from terror to horror fairly indiscriminately. These range from du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), through stories such as Angela Carter's *The Lady of the House of Love* (1979), to Scholastic's multi-authored *Point Horror* series (1988-2005) and more recently to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.* The particularly imaginative and visual form in which women writers in the Gothic genre expressed the conflict between inner and outer selfhood has always appealed to young female readers. Where fairy tales, originally intended for an adolescent and adult audience, had allowed their readers to confront their social and sexual fears through magic and monsters, so, as those tales increasingly became considered only suitable for the nursery, the Gothic novel offered this resolution through mystery and terror.

## History in the Making

In the light of my discussion of the early history of fiction for Young Adult girls, it is interesting to consider assertions about twentieth- and twenty-first-century, current, young adult fiction. Brian Alderson has asserted that it is distinguished by its ‘social awareness’, and the remarks by Hammond which Alderson quotes alleged that authors in the second half of the twentieth century had ‘predetermined instructional ends’ (Butts & Garrett, 2006: 208-9). We may ask whether such opinions upheld in the work of a late twentieth/twenty-first-century author such as Melvin Burgess. Walsh (in Pinsent, (2004:142) states that ‘Burgess is a controversial British writer who…explor[es] taboo areas of experience’. Burgess himself feels that ‘[w]e need to protect [children] from being over-protected’ (BBC interview, 2001, quoted in Pinsent). Walsh identifies that he avoids the kind of didacticism which Peter Hunt (2001:5) states ‘holds that children’s books must be moral and educational’ (in Pinsent, 2004:146). However his intention is that his adolescent readers should, through the use of multiple first person narratives, encounter different perspectives on the same moral questions, and form their own opinion about which should be accepted or rejected. Although his work is often shocking, it addresses serious issues which concern adolescents, in a language and style which they themselves use. Not only is it truly representative of its time and the issues of adolescent and young adult culture, it encourages its readers to examine the core truths at its heart and make an informed decision of their own. The absence of a discrete section detailing the moral of his stories in no way indicates that Burgess’ intentions are in essence any less didactic than those of Richardson or Radcliffe. Like the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works I considered, his novels fulfil all the criteria of reception/reader-response theory and of cultural materialism, while the market for them certainly reflects the ‘social and cultural conditions’ which Finkelstein and McCleery consider paramount in the study of book history. In novels such as Lady: My Life as a Bitch (2001) Burgess’ young adult fiction is as attuned to its readers as was that intended for Young Adult girls two centuries earlier.

Throughout the century and a half I examined, those novels which, through the heightened reality of their plots, and the engagement of their female protagonists, realistically explored the complexities of life-choices for their young audience were the YA fiction of their time. These works were the ‘crossover’ novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as assuredly as Salinger, Cormier, Pullman and Burgess are of the twentieth and twenty-first.

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## Biography

Bridget Carrington has recently been awarded a doctorate at Roehampton University for her research into the early history of fiction for young adult girls. A retired primary school teacher, she is associate editor of the *Journal of Children's Literature Studies*, and reviews and writes on a wide range of Literature for young people.

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Write4Children

# 'I love monsters – pretend monsters in books': a day in the life of a parent observer

Virginia Lowe

Monash University

## Abstract

A record of how *Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell* came to be written.  It looks in some detail at one day when the children were almost four, and just seven.. The book is the study of two children from birth to eight (independent reading) and covers book responses, reality understanding and play. All the other published reading records have been of girls (mine are a boy and a girl) and spend most of the book on the elder child, while I give equal time to both.

**Key words** parent-observer; Beowulf; fear; early childhood; reader response theory; imaginary play

*

I met *Books Before Five* (Dorothy White 1954) in librarianship classes. Here was someone actually talking about the way young children responded to books - something I had not encountered at all up to then. White was a librarian - a children's librarian - and kept a diary record of her older child's book behaviour, from around two.

I was excited by this. We were adults studying children's books, but who knew how actual children would respond to them? This seemed vital to me, especially as White's daughter seemed to be much more aware of how books were created, and what the stories meant, than the 'experts' were saying was possible. White's book was already twenty years old, so I determined that I would do a similar study when I had children of my own. Several years later I met John (at a library conference) and he was just as keen as I was with the plan, so when we had our first child, a girl, we began at once to record her behaviour with books (and anything related). John's cooperation was vital, as he often did the before-bed reading, especially after we had two children. He would often record their responses in the Reading Journal also.

It was probably just as well that I didn't look at White's book again until Rebecca was over two. White states that Carol's 'first book had vanished along with lost dolls and broken feeding bottles.' The White parents had 'drifted toward the belief that the enjoyment of personal ownership was a fact of life more worth knowing than how to look after this or that' so 'we gave Carol no advice and made no rules about the care of books until somewhere about two' explaining then that she could tear up her books if she wanted to, but she couldn't expect the picture to be there next time. She seems to have only had two books prior to two.

Ironically, this more casual attitude points to a much more ordered household. Because our house is littered with books (often from a library) – on beds, chairs, floor as well as bookshelves, all well within the reach of a crawling baby – it was essential that we taught the care of books early. We were not big on rules, but no tearing and no scribbling on books, were essential ones, virtually equivalent in importance to not going onto the road and not touching the stove. It was vitally important that respect for books was inculcated early.

The other major difference is in the record itself. White's was kept sporadically. She says 'Here follows the reading record only slightly edited'. There are never more than a couple of entries a month, and sometimes none at all – and all are short. Not remembering any of this, I began the parent observation records as soon as Rebecca had her first encounter with books, at thirteen weeks. We were in John's library, she in my arms. I was leafing through a large atlas on a stand, when I realised that Rebecca's head was turning as I turned the pages. This was readiness for books, I felt, and I started to read to her as soon as we got back home, beginning with Bruna's B is for Bear. The strong primary colours and clear black outlines fascinated her, and she followed the picture over as the page turned. We got about halfway through the alphabet, this first time, and from then on 'reading' – the Bruna, or Wildsmith's Mother Goose, first – became an almost daily activity, used for entertainment and comfort, just as it was by ourselves.

It was in hospital, just having given birth to our second child, Ralph, that I first encountered the Cragos, through an article in *Orana* (the children's libraries journal) where they talked about the record they were keeping of their daughter and books. I was devastated (briefly – it was probably part-partum depression actually) but I contacted them as soon as I was home. They were keeping a similar record, and seemed much more meticulous than I. They taped a reading session each day, and then Maureen transcribed the record at night. My record was not anything like as detailed as this. In fact, when their book (*A Prelude to Literacy)* was eventually published, they said that their policy was 'when in doubt, leave out'. This sounds ideal in a way, but I sacrificed accuracy for inclusiveness. Even the taping of one session a day was a big commitment – one hour of child-speech takes between four and ten hours to transcribe.

However tape recording would not do for the kind of record I was determined to continue keeping. What I was already doing was keeping a record of all the book references in play and general conversation, as well as in the reading sessions. The Cragos and ourselves became firm friends, and we visited each other, and even considered co-authoring a book on the two girls. This did not happen in the end, partly because our records were so different. Their book was published in 1984.

Meanwhile, when Ralph and I had returned from hospital (he ten days old) Rebecca had set up the bassinette for him with books around the walls, facing so that he could see them as soon as he was put down. So his first book encounter was much earlier than hers had been.

This is a good example of the influence of siblings on each other, which was to become such a rich source of book-reactions, as they grew. Both White and the Cragos had had a second child when the first was roughly three, but neither kept the same records of this child, so there was no record of the interaction between them. Also, as it happened, the second child was a girl in both cases, so there was no record at all of a male child. Similarly with the other two records which I discovered later, *Cushla and her Books* (though this one does start at birth, and is the inspiring story of how books helped the disabled Cushla when she was young) written by Dorothy Butler in 1979 and *The Braid of Literature* (Wolf and Brice Heath 1992). Wolf had a second child, also a girl. Butler was the grandmother, and her second grandchild was a girl too, but neither kept the same details on both children. It is true that Wolf does talk a little about the sibling interaction, but when the second child was an infant, during the period when she was keeping the most intense records of Lindsay, she seems to have made no notes about the baby reactions of Ashley – which was very disappointing, to me anyway.

So my record was proving to be unique. It was, and still is today, the only one dealing with two children in the same detail; the only one dealing with a male child; almost the only one beginning at birth, and almost the only one looking at siblings. Also my topic, their understanding of the reality status of the text and pictures, is unique in a book length study (the Cragos do have a chapter ‘The limits of reality: perceptions of the fantastic’).Young children are constantly underestimated. Cognitive psychologists work towards an average so that one can make some clinical study of each child. This naturally differs from analysis and discussion of adults and adult material. No one would dream of saying ‘thirty-six year olds will find this aspect difficult’ or ‘no one under fifty understands that other people have minds’ – ultimately, some will and some won’t, it’s acknowledged as a personality thing. Whereas with children, it tends to be taken as axiomatic. If the average child cannot demonstrate an understanding of, say, other people thinking differently from themselves, or of what is real and what is pretend, then the statement is made something like ‘children younger than four cannot understand’ these concepts; whereas in many cases this is simply not true. As with adults, it depends on experience, and their ability to articulate, just as much as their actual understanding. And the findings of the psychologists, average as they are, grossly underestimating children at the peak of their ability, have often not made their way to the children’s literature critics, who then, and even sometimes now, seem ignorant of the fact that neonates can recognise photos of their mothers, for instance – that they can clearly interpret pictures (Barrera and Maurer).

My initial interest in Carol White was because her responses were so much more complex than what was expected of young children, and so were the books that were recommended for them. At the time, there was not even a recognition that *Babies Need Books* (as Butler’s title has it). The concept of actually reading the words to an infant is still disputed today, as opposed to ‘sharing a book’ which is usually interpreted as talking about the pictures. In fact, most books for the very young have very few words at all – they are effectively play books, toys you can share with your child, and of course this is all important material too, and excellent modelling for language development, but does not give the child the full aesthetic picture book experience..

My book makes the case for actually reading the words. This was what we were inclined to do. Of course we shared the pictures as well, ‘There’s the little girl’ – ‘where’s the dog?’ – what does the cow say?’ – ‘which one is the pelican?’, increasing the complexity of the question with their developing understanding and language ability. But we also read the words. Picture books are a multi-faceted work of art, with the text and the pictures working together.

Did the keeping of the records affect the children? Well, to some extent, in that they would always have preferred me to be actually reading to them rather than making the notes. Of course most note-taking took place after they were asleep, but sometimes, if I had a pen to hand, I’d make the record more or less as it happened. One afternoon I was writing in the Journal, and left it for a minute. On return, in the margin, ‘I wont unutha chapt of dolls’ was scrawled in the shaky printing of a six year old. Justice prevailed in this case, and I read her the next chapter of Rumer Godden’s *Little Plum*.

However as the observation process used pen and paper (way before computers, and only occasionally done on the typewriter) it was congruent with the whole book activity. Also there was not the self-consciousness that seems to go with making an audio recording. Both Wolf’s and Crago’s children sometimes acted for the tape recorder – whereas my rushed writing was just part of what I did generally.

Sometimes this double dipping confused the records massively, because my attempts to record their comments on the first reading for the day would often be confused with their comments on later readings –I couldn’t make the children wait while I wrote up the first lot, before they heard the story ‘again’

The most memorable of these confusing days, was son Ralph’s first encounter with White and Provensen’s *Myths and Legends* at 3-11[1]. This day, 16th February 1979, takes up 30 pages in the Journal – largely jotted at the time in a cheap exercise book (much of his language verbatim), and transferred to the hard cover Reading Journal in the evening and the next day. It was the story of Beowulf and Grendel which most fascinated him.

Here is a brief summary of the day, to give some idea of the highlights. Ralph was going to kindergarten three days a week, but not this day, and Rebecca, 7-2, was at school.

First Ralph spent most of the morning in his room, some of it playing with cars, but mostly looking at books, carefully, page by page – happily amusing himself. One of the books he looked through was Hale’s *Orlando Buys a Cottage*. Later, playing outside, he told me ‘Bunny jumped in a bucket of whitewash’. I recognised a quote, and asked him if someone in a book had done that, and he told me ‘Tinkle’ – who was one of Orlando’s kittens.

From the library several days before, I had chosen *Myths and Legends*, because kindergarten contact had aroused a great interest in violence of all kinds. He was cutting the hero Mandrake the Magician comics from issues of the *Woman's Weekly* put out for craft activities, and pasting them into a book - he had five already which he pored over. His friends Matthew and Sam were allowed comics and even toy guns – why couldn't he? Coming home from his first day at kinder he was most excited to show me 'Mum, you can make a gun like this!' with two fingers for the barrel and thumb for the trigger.

I pondered what form of violence I could condone (literary of course), and remembered that Rebecca had been given a Ladybird book *Famous Legends: Book 1* (Preshous and Ayton). She had shown no interest in it (though the donor, mother of a son, had said 'because they love them, don't they?') and Ralph had discovered it himself on her shelves two months before, admired the picture of Perseus with the snaky-haired Gorgon's head on the front cover, and begged to hear it read – several times. So I had found the White/Provensen collection to borrow. Library books lived, face out, under the hallway bookshelves, and this morning he had caught sight of the Fury on the cover – half bird, half woman – and queried it. This led to the first long session poring over the pictures together, and his first lot of comments. He was so vocal about Provensen's illustrations that I returned to the book soon afterward with a pen and paper to get down as much as I could remember. However he soon turned up again, and his comments this time were even more numerous – or at least I was able to note them as he spoke, because I had the pen to hand. He did not hear any of the stories actually read until we returned fromcollecting Rebecca from school.

On the second time through, even though I was writing and only paying half attention to him, I noted that he was not at all impatient, never trying to turn ahead. There was just the occasional poignant comment: 'When can we see the book-thing – the cut-off head part?' (a reference to the cover of *Famous Legends*) or 'Have you gone past the monster's mother? That's the part I really love! – When will we see the monster's mother taking the person underwater? That's what I love! [Why do you love it? I asked] 'Cos I like monsters – pretend monsters in books' he told me. It was Grendel and his mother who fascinated him the first time through, and whom he was waiting anxiously for, the second time. Despite his protestations of loving the monsters, and declaring 'I'm not scared of them if they haven't got anything dangerous like guns and spears and bows and arrows and swords!', he was holding tightly to my thumb throughout the Grendel sections. It seemed a new maturity in him, to feel fear but talk big about how much he enjoyed it. Not many months before, he would have avoided it.

We had to stop the second time through, and go to pick up Rebecca from school. In the car, on the way he looked through and eventually found Grendel's mother again, then showed it to Rebecca with great enthusiasm when she joined us. Once home I read the Beowulf story to them both, and later again he told it to John when he arrived home.

Meanwhile, after the story, Rebecca decided she was going to make a horse mask out of two paper supermarket bags. She told me she'd got the idea from Cover Ups (Practical Puffin series) – not reading the instructions, but just following the idea from the pictures. Ralph got very enthusiastic – 'I'm pretending I'm the monster. Becca, I've got a good idea – I can be the monster that was in the book we read, and you can be the person that kills him!' This was unusual on several counts. One was that it was usually Rebecca who instigated pretend games, and Ralph who played along obligingly. The other was that it was the only time that either child acted out the role of the villain, who, of course, can never win in the end. Ralph had never taken on a female role before, either. Rebecca objected 'But I'm a horse!', and he countered 'well it said they're riding on horses, that's what it said when they were after the mother, so I could be the mother'. The mask didn't get finished that evening, so the game didn't take place until the next day (Saturday – when John was Beowulf, sprouting mock Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry).

There were also a couple of non-fiction books. In *Australian Spiders in Colour* (Mascord). Ralph showed me, accurately I think, 'That's the one we saw at Uncle Frank's the other day'. Rebecca announced 'If you want to know anything about spiders just ask me, cos I know a lot about spiders'. Ralph: 'I only know about redback spiders'. Rebecca: 'Do you know what redback spiders really are? Venomous!' Ralph: 'What's venomous?' Rebecca: 'It can kill you – like a blue ringed octopus!'

There were two books on China and Chinese writing, from which Rebecca practiced writing some characters with paint. She did not, this day, have a chapter of a novel before bed. We had just finished *A Stranger at Greene Knowe* (Lucy Boston) and had not yet started the next in the series.

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[1] I have used 3-11 to indicate that the child was 3 years and 11 months old, 7-2 to show 7 years 2 months old etc.

I offered to read *Benjy's Dog House* (Graham) while Ralph finished his dinner. Neither child had heard this, and both listened. Ralph: 'I choosed this out of the library! I looked through it and it was a good one!' A few pages in he said 'I thought it was Harry' (*Harry the Dirty Dog* Zion/Graham) to which I replied 'He looks like Harry. Do you know why?' 'Yes, the same person drew them – he always seems to draw dogs!'

As can be seen, a great deal happened with books on this day – and probably every day was just as full, though I didn't get it all down in as much detail, as a rule. It was hard work listening to the child, jotting the notes, and afterwards writing them up carefully.

This furious record-keeping was not typical behaviour on my part. Until they were about four, both children understood that I was writing a book about children's books, but not that I was recording what they actually said (I didn't want to make them self-conscious about their comments). This was sufficient explanation for me writing in the Reading Diary in the evening, and even during the day. But gradually I explained that I was interested in what they 'thought about' the books too, so I could ask them, and they would give their thoughts, apart from the usual book chat which I also tried to remember and record. Rebecca started reporting her little brother's responses back to me, when she was just over four. Of course these were not necessarily reliable, but it was interesting that she knew I valued his responses, and doubtless also, by then, understood that I was recording her comments and reactions too. As an adult, she says she felt I was recording her every comment and behaviour, but that she is 'pleased and proud to be part of the process' as she explains in the Afterword to my book.

Neither child found it an easy task to learn to read, despite their exposure to so many books, and to the actual words as well (many of which they could even recite from about two). This may have been because they were hearing long novels by the time they started school, and the readers they brought home were uninspiring by comparison. I kept the Reading Journal almost every day until they were reading at their interest level at eight, and sporadically afterwards – during holidays away for instance, when there was a lot of book discussion and play based on books, again, despite the fact that they could now read them themselves. Often we would also have a book read aloud again, too. However after they were both reading independently, my record dropped off, but it still sits in 26 volumes, over 6000 handwritten pages. When I used it for my PhD thesis, I read through it all, and indexed it under 317 topics (on cards). Later the thesis became *Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two children tell*, published by Routledge.

I mainly emphasised the children's growth in understanding the reality-status of the stories and pictures ('Is this a real story?', 'Tarzan is my favourite not-real person!'). This central chapter is entitled '"This one's exotic and not real too!": What is real, what is pretend?' But along the way I also found I had to cover picture conventions; authorship and the illustrator's role ('The man who drawed it was wrong!'); the author's ideology; characters, emotions and the theory of mind ('Did he ever think again?'); identification and reality ('I'm Tigger pretending to be Eeyore'); and humour and irony ('it was a joke because it couldn't really happen'). There is also a chapter on infant book behaviour, from which some knowledge of their understanding that pictures are not the actual thing pictured, can be gleaned (also there is so little actual observation of babies with books published, that I felt it was important to supply some record).

I hope the book will help in understanding very young children and books. Despite expert opinion, it shows that three year olds can: understand what is real and what is pretend; understand the roles of author and illustrator; recognise the works of different specific authors and illustrators; enjoy long words; remember the text of a book to quote from it in another context; use the stories and concepts from books, adapted to their own games; are able to retell the story. Many of these behaviours are demonstrated by Ralph in just this one ordinary/extraordinary day.

Don't underestimate little children. Read them the words however complex, and let them grow on new vocabulary and concepts. It really matters how artists illustrate for children, for instance. Many an illustration was challenged by my two on the grounds that 'they're supposed to be ants but they've got too many legs', or conversely 'that spider's only got six legs!

I hope that parents will take from my book the inspiration to ply their infants with books, read the words and continue reading aloud while they are learning to read themselves; researchers will look again at the expectations of young children; primary and kindergarten teachers and crèche workers, will realise that young children appreciate being stretched with rich vocabulary and rich illustration style and need story after story to keep up enthusiasm for acquiring literacy themselves; publishers will realise that many children want long words and complex concepts – and that every one interested in books and writing will enjoy the stories of two children and their books, and watching how a love of books develops.

### Children's Books Mentioned

Boston, L. *A Stranger at Greene Knowe*

Bruna, D. *B is for Bear*

*Cover Ups* (Practical Puffin series)

Godden, R. *Little Plum*

Graham, M.B. *Benjy's Dog House*

Hale, K. *Orlando (the Marmalade Cat) Buys a Cottage*

Mascord, R. *Australian Spiders in Colour*

Preshous, J.D.M. and Ayton, R. *Famous Legends: Book 1*

White, A.T. and Provensen, A. & M. *Myths and Legends*

Wildsmith, B. *Mother Goose: Nursery Rhymes*

Zion, G. *Harry the Dirty Dog*

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## Biography

Virginia Lowe has in lectured children's literature and English at university, been Judge for the CBCA Book of the Year Awards, and been a school and municipal librarian. She has written extensively on young children and books. For the last fourteen years she has run a manuscript assessment agency, Create a Kids' Book – which also offers writing e-courses, mentorships,

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Write4Children

# Writing Humorous and Nonsense Verse

Edel Wignell

## Abstract

Nonsense verse is fun. It flows easily, and looks as though it has been dashed off in a spare moment. But, to be effective, it must be carefully planned, for it needs a logical basis. Edel Wignell describes how this may be achieved by using invented words, double meanings, homonyms, place names, and absurd characters and situations.

**Keywords** humorous, nonsense, zany, jokes, absurd, invented

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Nonsense verse is fun. It flows easily, and looks as though it has been dashed off in a spare moment. But, to be effective, it must be carefully planned, for it needs a logical basis. Here are some ways of approaching it.

## Invented words

Many writers of nonsense verse have contributed to the English language by their inventive use of language. One of these was the English writer, A. A. Milne, who created many funny words, such as a 'woffelly' nose for a mouse. The placement of new words with correct and appropriate ones, gives them logical authority. In 'Furry Bear', the animal wouldn't care if the weather 'froze or snew', and he wouldn't mind if it 'snowed or friz'.

Invented words as internal rhymes, such as Milne's 'sneezles and freezles' and 'foxes who didn't wear soxes', appeal to all ages. Many young children freely make up their own rhyming words and chants, so they appreciate such nonsense. My 'Ruth's Tooth' is for five-and-six-year-olds experiencing the loss of their teeth.

### RUTH'S TOOTH

There was a young lassie called Ruth,
Who wriggled a little looth tooth,
She hitched and she twitched
Like a goblin bewitched,
Till that tooth came looth from her mooth.

first published in Puffinalia (Journal of the Australian Puffin Club)

## Double meanings

The absurdity of sayings, clichés and metaphors in the English language can inspire verse. We say 'it's raining cats and dogs', 'don't touch that cake - I've got my eye on it!', 'I'm paying through the nose', 'eat your heart out', 'I've got a frog in my throat'...

On author visits to schools I ask children to share sayings that are common in their families. I have a list of fifty that they have contributed. They respond with gusto to questions, 'What if it really did rain cats and dogs - here in the school playground?', 'What if you really did get a frog in your throat?', and enjoy working out literal presentations, in stories, verse and cartoons.In Australia fish fingers are finger-shaped pieces of mashed fish - a deep-fried, frozen fast food. One day a friend and her little daughter, who had been spring-cleaning, found a stray fish finger in the bottom of their freezer, and brought it to me as a writing inspiration gift.

### FISH FINGERS

A fish has fins,
As everyone knows,
And gills as well,
Instead of a nose.

Eyes and mouth,
Tail and scales,
And, because it gets itchy,
Fingers with nails

To give a scratch
Under the chin,
Between the eyes,
Behind the fin.

from Sue Machin (comp.) Stay Loose, Mother Goose (Omnibus)

Body words can evoke amusing images, so I wrote a series called 'Body Bits': verses of various lengths about Ear Wigs, Head Lock, Leg Irons, Hair Raising, Knee Caps, Arm Chair, Knuckle Duster and Foot Lights. Feel free to use these titles - there is no copyright on ideas, just on expression. Everyone will have a different image.

## Homonyms

In the English language some words sound the same but are spelt differently: for, four; raised, razed; meat, meet; morning, mourning; to, too, two; cents, sense, scents...

These can be explained or illustrated in an absurd way in two or four-lined nonsense verses.

### HOARSE HORSE

My horse has caught a cold -
Impossible to cheer-up;
He's sneezing, wheezing, coughing...
I'll dose him with cough-stirrup!

## Place Names

An atlas is an excellent resource for the creation of nonsense verse, especially limericks. Every country has its strangely named places which evoke teasing and laughter. Here are some splendid ones found in Australia: Woolloomooloo, Uputipotpon, Murwillumbah, Murrumbidgee. Smiggin Holes is the name of a ski resort in the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales. As a silly name, it needed a silly verse.

### SMIGGIN HOLES

At Smiggin Holes, at Smiggin Holes,
The miners dig for telegraph poles;
Soon the place will be like a sieve,
Nowhere for the people to live.

first published in Orbit Magazine

Some place names provide opportunities for internal rhyming madness. Toggannoggera was a gift, offering words rhyming with ogg. (In pronouncing Toggannoggera, give emphasis to ogg – twice.)

## TOGGANNOGGERA

On my way to Toggannoggera
My horse began to joggannoggera,
Then to canter,
Next to gallop,
Landed in a boggannoggera.

On my way to Toggannoggera
I came down with a woggannoggera,
Felt so sick,
Thought I would die,
Lay beside a loggannoggera.

On my way to Toggannoggera
I got lost in a foggannoggera,
Wandered around
Alone and lost,
Found at last by a doggannoggera.

On my way to Toggannoggera
My car coughed up a coggannoggera,
Snorted and chugged,

Hiccoughed and croaked,
Sounded like a froggannoggera.

first published in Countdown Magazine

## Absurd characters and situations

Many nursery rhymes and narrative poems include absurd characters and situations. Short ones, such as 'Hey, diddle, diddle', 'Sing a Song of Sixpence', 'Hickory dickory, dock!', 'Peter Peter Pumpkin-eater', and long ones, such as 'Old Mother Hubbard', provide a pattern for new nonsense verse.

Most of the basic nursery rhyme collections contain a similar selection, so it is worthwhile reading from a comprehensive collection to find something new, strange and different to spark the imagination. The following is one of my favourites:

**HIGGLETY, PIGGLETY**

Higglety, pigglety, pop!
The dog has eaten the mop;
The pig's in a hurry,
The cat's in a flurry,
Higglety, pigglety, pop!

It is included in *The Mother Goose Treasury*, a collection of 408 rhymes (Puffin Books). Many of the 897 illustrations in colour by Raymond Briggs give the rhymes a zany, nonsensical twist. 'Higglety Pigglety Pop' shows a stretch-dog - mop head at the front, and handle end at the tail.

## Regularly read nonsense

Many poetry collections have a nonsense section which includes long, narrative poems, such as Edward Lear's 'The Owl and the Pussy Cat', Lewis Carroll's 'You are old, Father William', Rachel Field's 'The Duel', T. S. Eliot's 'The Rum Tum Tugger', Laura E. Richards' 'Tirra Lirra', A. A. Milne's 'The Four Friends', Hilaire Belloc's 'The Lion and the Tiger', Shelley Silverstein's 'Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout' and Ogden Nash's, 'The Tale of Custard the Dragon'.

Reading provides a reminder of logical ways to approach nonsense verse, and may stimulate the writing of new ones to tickle the imaginations of today's children.

The poem, 'Hungry Ghosts'. was inspired by a children's joke:

> Q. What do ghosts eat?
>
> A. Dreaded wheat for breakfast, ghoulash for dinner and spookhetti for supper.

### HUNGRY GHOSTS

What do hungry ghosts eat

For breakfast every day?

'Nervous oats and scary rice,

And *dreaded wheat*,' they say.

What do hungry ghosts eat

For dinner every night?

'Haunted snags and spectral spuds,

And *ghoulash* - always right.'

What do hungry ghosts eat

For snack bits in-between?

'Eerie eggs and airy sims,

And *spooketti* - slimy green.'

Commended, Centoria Poetry Competition, Australia, March 2000

Commended, Fantasia Literary Competition, Australia, 2001

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## Biography

Australian writer, Edel Wignell ('Edel' rhymes with 'medal'), writes for both children and adults. For children, she has more than 90 published books - fiction, non-fiction, picture-stories, and script and story collections. She has a special interest in the oral tradition, and has written three collections based on Asian folk tales with accompanying Notes for Teachers, the latest being The White Elephant: drama based on Asian folk tales (Teaching Solutions, Melbourne). Edel's latest picture-story is Big Eyes, Scary Voice, illustrated by Carl Pearce (Tamarind Books/Random House Children's Books, London). She is fascinated by the kind of lateral thinking and language awareness that is inherent in the creation of jokes. For fun she writes humorous and nonsense verse, and for fitness she power-walks.
www.edelwignell.com.au

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# Want to study children's literature? Welcome to Cambridge

Maria Nikolajeva

Cambridge University

A new centre for research in children's literature was inaugurated on February 3 with a lecture by the world-famous scholar Jack Zipes. The Cambridge/Homerton Research and Teaching Centre for Children's Literature, its official name, is a joint venture of Homerton College and the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. Homerton College has a thirty-year old tradition of teaching and studying children's literature, with names such as Eve Bearne, Victor Watson and the amazing Morag Styles whose unforgettable conferences have reverberated through children's literature research in the UK and echoed far abroad. Morag's enthusiasm has been successfully recruiting new people to the children's literature team, which now counts over a dozen. Some come from the English Department, which, at least in Cambridge, still looks down on kiddie lit. Apart from undergraduate and masters courses, Morag has managed to start the annual Philippa Pearce Memorial Lecture, develop a fruitful collaboration with the masters programme in children's books illustrations at Anglia Ruskin University, initiate a thriving reading group in children's literature and in passing publish a number of excellent books, in which members of the team were included and directly involved.

It was easy to come to this lavishly set table and say: "Now let's have a research centre". In fact, the objectives of the Centre are to continue doing everything that the team has been doing already: run excellent and highly appreciated courses, produce high quality research, arrange conferences and seminars, attract research students and visiting scholars, and link with practitioners. Yet the creation of a centre indicates the presence of a strong research community, more than just a sum of efforts.

There are several ways in which the new centre is distinct from other existing centres in the UK. Between ourselves we have unique expertise in poetry, film and multimedia texts, including picturebooks, as well as in writing for children. We also have a balance of literary and educational approaches, implying a healthy mix of substantial theoretical expertise and wide experience of empirical research. Not least, we already have a wide national and international reputation – not bad for a newly fledged community. Homerton Library boasts an outstanding collection of children's books, and the Faculty Library is eagerly purchasing reference. Not to forget the University Library within walking distance. Our final triumph is that the Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy is an Honorary Homerton Fellow, and she has obviously said that she only accepted the fellowship because Homerton supports children's literature.

At present, the Centre operates with existing resources, but we hope to get support in the future. (Donations welcome, preferably in six-digit range). Homerton has kindly offered our guest researchers office space, and our first overseas visitor spent six weeks with us in January-February.

In September, the Centre hosts its first international conference “The Emergent Adult: Adolescent Literature and Culture”, featuring as keynote speakers the renowned professor Shirley Brice Heath and the highly acclaimed Young Adult author Meg Rosoff.
IFor more information about the Centre, visit http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/childrensliterature/ or contact Maria Nikolajeva, mn351@cam.ac.uk.

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Write4Children

# Discussion Paper: Writing for Children – A Difficult Construct or an Instinctual Process? A Personal Response to Peter Hunt's article 'Reading Children's Literature and Writing for Children'

Katherine Langrish

## Abstract

A personal response by Katherine Langrish, children's author (*Troll Fell, Troll Mill, Troll Blood, Dark Angels*, published by HarperCollins) to some points in 'Reading Children's Literature and Writing For Children' by Peter Hunt, formerly of Cardiff University, published in *Write4Children*, Vol 1 Issue 1.

While the writer agrees that wide reading in children's literature is essential for anyone who wishes to write children's fiction, she takes issue with Peter Hunt's suggestion that writing for children is inherently more difficult than writing for adults, and she believes that the implication of part of Hunt's article – that writers for children should begin by analytically examining the nature of the relationship between adult writer and child reader – is more suited to the academic criticism of children's literature than to the writing process.

**Keywords** Creative writing, children's literature, creative process, critical analysis, imagery

*

Peter Hunt's essay in the first issue of Write4Children contains some provocative stuff.

> Writing for children *is* more difficult than writing for adults, just as reading children's books (for adults) is much more difficult that writing adults' books.

I read this and blinked. I've been a published writer of children's books for over eight years now, and while it's nice to come across a corrective to the all-too-common view that writing for children is so simple that any celebrity can take a crack at it, this did seem to be rushing to the opposite extreme. Hunt continues:

> Somewhere in the equation is a child, or the idea of a child, or a group of children, or some amorphous mass defined as children, or a specific childhood, or the culture's idea of childhood, or the publisher's idea of childhood. Then there is our relationship with these various childhoods and our motives and our needs and their needs…
>
> All of these things have to be reflected in what we choose to write, and how we write it. It's a complex business…

It made me feel like Molière's Monsieur Jourdain when he discovers that for forty years he has been speaking in prose without knowing it. If this were truly the way in which children's writers approached their work, it would indeed be a complex business. But I don't believe it is. What Peter Hunt is describing is very much a critic's approach, not a writer's. I'm not saying he's wrong, but I am saying that the way he tells it is not the way it feels, at least to me. And I would like to offer some personal reflections on the creative process.

To begin with, I don't find writing for children 'more difficult' than writing for adults. I've written very little for adults, no more than a couple of unpublished short stories. If I found writing for adults 'easier', I suppose I'd write for adults, but what does 'easier' mean in such a context? I write for children in much the same way that water runs downhill, or a beech nut turns into a beech: it's my natural tendency. But excellence in any form of writing is difficult to attain. It will require hard work, natural talent, mastery of technique, and the ability to self-edit, regardless of readership. Hunt appears to suggest that the 'difficulty' he sees as inherent in writing for children has something to do with bridging the experiential gap between the child reader and the adult writer – so does he assume that writing for adults is in some way less effortful, involving less mediation and more shared experience? How valid is this? Why shouldn't we substitute 'adult' for 'child' in the passage I have quoted, above? Adult readers also are pretty diverse.

So what are my concerns when beginning a book for children? According to Hunt, I should first of all sit down and have a good think about what children are. What is childhood? Which children am I writing for? How should I reach them? What should I include and exclude as appropriate or inappropriate? I should also examine my own motives for writing: 'the good children's book comes from a respectful mutual negotiation of the ground between adult and child, taking into account needs and understandings.' (Is this last even possible? How can this supposed negotiation be 'mutual' – children are not generally consulted in the writing of children's books, nor do I feel this is necessary, though their verdict as readers is crucial.)

Do I do any of these things? Absolutely not. These questions never enter my mind. It's true I'm going to pick a protagonist under the age of eighteen, and it's true that I know from the outset that the book isn't going to be *marketed* for adults – although some adults will read it. But I don't consciously think about any of that, since my subconscious sorted it all out for me ages ago, a function of a lifetime's continual, although certainly not exclusive, reading of children's fiction, fairytales and fantasy – because those are the kinds of stories I like. This reading, this living in the context of what I write, is crucial, of course. For all practical purposes, I am my readers and my readers are me. I don't have to analyse them.

So I'm not considering the readers when I begin a new book. The way a new story begins for me is with a series of floating images somewhere at the back of my head. The germ for my most recently published book (*Dark Angels*, HarperCollins, 2009), was a vision of huge blazing angels walking through a cornfield and setting the corn alight. I could see them so clearly that they set me alight too. I got that shiver down the spine which tells an author that the most important thing of all has happened – the new book has been conceived.

How does it develop? The image of angels and cornfields led me to a rural and religious setting: a medieval village. But I didn't fancy the high Middle Ages; I wanted something earlier, something with a rougher edge. And I wanted wild country, moorlands and mountains. How about the late 1100's, on the Welsh Marches? And I knew I wanted to incorporate genuine folklore as I had in my three earlier *Troll* books – and it turned out that there was a wealth of tales from that very time and area available from the 12th century men of letters, Gerald of Wales and Walter Map.

Who was my hero? And my heroine? Here one concern was not to duplicate the personalities of the main characters in the 'Troll' books, Peer and Hilde. I wanted a boy as different as possible from diffident, self-reflexive Peer. I named him Wolf, and got another picture in my head of him standing on a mountain ridge, watching a shower of shooting stars. I felt him as an angry, impulsive character. Angry about what? Maybe he was running away from someone who had ill-treated him. Who might that be?

And what was the supernatural element in the book? It had to be regional, Anglo-Welsh, in keeping with the place and time. Elves – but not Tolkien's elves – suggested themselves: the elves in whom medieval people believed, sinister and dangerous beings connected with notions of both hell and death.

So one thing led to another and I explored the dark world of my new story. In the end, neither of the images I began with – the fiery angels walking through the cornfields, and the boy on the hill watching the stars fall – made it into the book, or not unchanged. But they informed it. They showed me what kind of book I needed it to be.But did I especially consider my readers *during* any part of this process? I don't think I did. While writing, I'm focussing on telling a particular story as well as I can. I'm conscious at every moment of technical decisions – how best to construct the narrative, how to keep the writing sharp and vivid, what episodes are non-essential and ought to be cut – but I can honestly say that I've never felt the fact that my readers will be (mostly) children as an added layer of difficulty. I've never modified my vocabulary, never worried about my 'tone of voice', never censored anything or needed to censor it. I write for children (and for myself), not down to them.

Children at school are often asked by teachers to draw up 'plans' for essays or stories. As a child I always cheated, writing the essay or story first and doing the plan afterwards. I generally got high marks and no teacher ever seemed to suspect. Of course I know that planning the structure of essays, of stories and books, can be enormously helpful, not to say vital, for many children and adults alike. But I have a sneaking suspicion that there may be a sizeable percentage of people, like me, who don't quite know where they're going until they begin, yet find they follow the clue quite safely through the labyrinth. We can't map the pathway until we have trodden it.

It’s a good thing to recognise children’s literature as worthy of academic attention; it’s important to scrutinise what is being written for children, to distinguish the good from the mediocre and to celebrate the best. Criticism has its place, the academic approach its interest. It may be right that a good academic critic, like a good anatomist, should be able to dissect the relationship of author and reader, expose the sinews, and explain what is happening under the skin. Without musculature, and the articulation of the bones, and the circulation of the blood, who could ever kick a football into a goal? But who could ever kick a successful goal whilst consciously thinking about the co-ordination of these things? Hunt’s account of the actual process of writing for children is so constructed, so cerebral, so foreign to my own experience, that I conclude it is for students of literature, not for creative writers.

## Reference

Hunt, Peter, “Reading Children’s Literature and Writing For Children’, *Write4Children*, Vol 1 Issue 1

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## Book Reviews

***Illustrated Children's Books,*** **Duncan McCorquodale, Sophie Hallam, Libby Waite eds., (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2009) 239 pages (hardback) ISBN: 9789 1906155 81 0**

The *Illustrated Children's Book* is a potted history of children's illustrated books. The authors state that the illustrated book is where pictures complement the text whereas a picture book is where the pictures come first or are more than equal partners and this makes for an interesting discussion.

The book is split into two clear sections – Authors & Illustrators 1659-1945 and Authors and Illustrators 1945-now. Both sections consist of brief illustrated articles on either illustrators or renowned texts that are perceived to have had an impact on the genre of illustrated books, for example *Alice in Wonderland* (Lewis Carroll, 1865). In turn, each short article examines the work and/or illustrator and provides some biographical information. It is easy to follow and finding information is made easy once you get used to the slightly confusing ordering system of which is decided by either the illustrator's name or the title of the book depending on who or what has had the greatest impact.

The book starts with a Foreward by Anthony Browne, Children's Laureate. His support of the book coincides with his pledge as Children's Laureate '…to reinvest the picture book with greater importance…' Within his Forward he also explores the importance of illustrated children's books both past and present.

Prof Peter Hunt, critic and writer of several books and articles on children's literature (including 'Reading Children's Literature and Writing for Children' in the last edition of this Journal) has contributed an essay entitled 'The World in Pictures.' He discusses how the history of children's books is bound up in the history of culture, society and ideology. Furthermore, whilst the history of illustrated books parallels the history of children's books, it is also linked to the history of printing, which he briefly explores; concluding that the uniform brand image for Enid Blyton's *Noddy,* as illustrated by Harmsen van der Beek, in1949, skilfully pioneers the comodification of children's literature from then onwards.

The second essay is by Dr Lisa Sainsbury, The National Centre for Research into Children's Literature, and is entitled 'Contemporary Children's Books'. Her essay explores the development of illustrated children's books since the Second World War. She highlights some unforgettable moments in book illustrating, such as Garth Williams' illustration of *Charlotte's Web* (EB Williams, 1952) quickly moving onto the works of others such as Anthony Browne, Helen Oxenbury and Michael French. Sainsbury explores the movement from a subdued palate in the 1940s and 50s to the use of vibrant colour in the likes of Lucy Cousins' *Maisy Books* in the 1990s. Whilst highlighting the dominance of the UK publishing industry by Ladybird Books, who were first established in 1940. Sainsbury perceives the post war years as a time of consolidation for children's illustrated books, suggesting that the 1960s provided momentum for the profusion of picture books currently published. She concludes that it is very important that we look down the long history of book illustrations in order to understand how far and how well they have developed.

The *Illustrated Children's Book* is a delightful book to dip in and out of and makes a wonderful research resource for those in need of a brief background history of the illustrated book, as well as those who just want to look at the pictures - and what can be wrong with that?

Reviewed by Vanessa Harbour, University of Winchester

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***Warriors Caught in the Crossfire,* Nancy Bo Flood. Honesdale, Pennsylvania: Front Street. 2010. 142 pages (hardback) ISBN 976-1-59078-661-1**

I’ve rarely read a book written with such tenderness and honesty, which is probably why I found this one quite difficult to review. Nancy Bo Flood’s strong sense of connection with the island, on which she once lived and worked as a teacher, gives this story a special quality that would be hard to break down into secrets of craft.

Described as a ‘novel for young adults’ it is the story of an island as much as its people. Saipan may be a tiny dot on charts of the Western Pacific Ocean but towards the end of World War II it became a strategic prize that the Japanese were prepared to defend to the death. For Saipan’s native people as well as the Japanese settlers, this would test the tenuous trust between them beyond any normal limits.

Joseph, a native boy intensely proud of his family and their cultural heritage, finds it hard to follow his father’s advice to ‘think like a turtle’ and withdraw his head into a strong shell. For his best friend, Kento, the future is just as disturbing but Kento’s father is Japanese and he has access to more privileges as well as information. As the American forces advance, relationships become tense, rules more stringent and curfews more harshly enforced.

When the boys’ fathers are forced to leave their families, Joseph and Kento each find themselves with a huge responsibility. Suddenly, their child-like wish to learn how to be a warrior becomes a matter of life and death. As if the Japanese soldiers are not threatening enough, the Americans are rumoured to eat children so their imminent attack seems like anything but rescue.

Nancy Bo Flood sets a moving story of life, death, war and friendship in this chilling context. The gentle fortitude of the native families and the devastating impact of war on their way of life are constant, wistful threads. The pitfalls of writing the cultural differences of America and Japan are profound but Bo Flood digs deeper into the complexities of growing up in this environment, adding a third, indigenous culture. Her sensitivity and respect for the real people who lived through this part of the island’s history strongly echo the time she spent listening to the voices of its elders, their children and grand-children.

“Whom can I trust” is a favourite question for children’s fiction but in this story it carries a bleak reality with no easy answers. The moving description of the tragic events that took place when the Japanese realised they were losing the battle for the island left me wondering if the book was a little stark for the lower end of the target age range of ten to fourteen years. The truth is that children encounter war and tragedy frequently on TV but here is a form of creative expression with more emotional impact than dramatic effect. It sparked a debate in my mind about the balance between protecting children from the distressing effects of conflict and helping them to see through it in such a way that it helps them to make judgements in their own lifetime. Trained as a child psychologist, I imagine the author gave a good deal of thought to the way this is pitched. On her website, Bo Flood suggests: “Story is a powerful way to build compassion and bridge understanding between cultures. Story has the power to heal as well as teach” which seems a very worthwhile reason to tackle such a difficult subject.

My lasting impression is of beauty and peace battered by politics and power; even if beauty prevails, the cost is shocking and memorable – as is *Warriors Caught in the Crossfire*.

Reviewed by: Melanie Newman, University of Winchester

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# Write4Children

## Call For Papers

Next edition is 1st November 2010.

Submission Deadline 1st September 2010

**Instructions for Authors**

All papers for Write4Children must be submitted via an email with attachment to write4children@winchester.ac.uk

1. Articles should be between 2000 and 5000 words. They should be accompanied by an abstract of not more than 200 words, and six keywords for indexing purposes.

2. All papers for the Write4Children must be submitted via an email with attachment to write4children@winchester.ac.uk

3. Papers should be submitted as one file with, where possible, all tables and figures in the correct place in the text.

4. Footnotes should be avoided. Essential notes should be numbered in the text and grouped together at the end of the article. Diagrams and Figures, if they are considered essential, should be clearly related to the section of the text to which they refer. The original diagrams and figures should be submitted with the top copy.

5. References should be set out in alphabetical order of the author's name in a list at the end of the article. Please use the Harvard Referencing style.

6. Once the refereeing procedures are completed, authors should supply a word-processor file (on disc, CD-ROM or by e-mail attachment) containing the final version of their manuscript. Files should be saved in Microsoft Word. Tables and Figures (TIFF or EPS format preferred) should be saved in separate files from the rest of the manuscript.

7. The author of an article accepted for publication will receive page proofs for correction, if there is sufficient time to do so. This stage must not be used as an opportunity to revise the paper, because alterations are extremely costly; extensive changes will be charged to the author and will probably result in the articles being delayed to a later issue. Speedy return of corrected proofs is important.