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Histories of Childhood and Literary Competence: Teaching Children's Literature in the University

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Teaching children's literature to third and fourth year students in the Department of English Studies at the University of Strathclyde for the last ten years or so has helped me to reflect on the implications of that process. The primary thing I stress to students is that studying children's literature at university is significantly different from reading children's literature as children or young adults since it involves taking a critical stance towards a set of literary texts that, hopefully, the students love, once loved, or will come to love. Differences between university students of literature and child readers are matters of literary competence and levels of knowledge about literature and the world. But this is not to say that student readers will inevitably see things in children's books that are likely to be missed by child readers. Many student readers need to be shown that *The Chronicles of Narnia* presents an allegorical version of the Bible's historical grand narrative before they are able to see what they had missed when they read the series as children.

Another basic thing to emphasise is that the majority of texts written for children are written (and published, edited, reviewed, judged, bought and taught) by adults. Such adults nearly always proceed according to assumptions about what childhood is or should be and what children ought to read. As a consequence, children's literature tends to have an agenda: adults are trying to do things to children – to save, improve, teach, empower or entertain them – through the medium of literature. A historical approach to children's literature enables us to see that what adults try to do to children via literary texts changes through history and according to changing ideas about children and childhood.

The best way to establish a critical distance to children's literature is through combining a

historical approach with close attention to literary technique. The historical approach has the potential advantage of challenging students' often unexamined assumptions about children and childhood, while the focus on literary technique pushes students beyond character and content. Student readers seem irresistibly drawn to making claims about whether or not child characters are 'realistic' and about how child readers might respond to the text being studied. One of the crucial learning outcomes that a university class in children's literature needs to make possible is the realisation that such judgements are generally based on historically and culturally specific assumptions about children and childhood and that children's literature plays a central role in the construction and reconstruction of such assumptions.

Furthermore, instead of trying to imagine how a 'real' child might respond to a text, students need to be alerted to theoretical notions such as the 'implied reader' or the 'intended reader' drawn from Reader Response Theory. The implied or intended reader is not an actual reader but an imagined reader shaped and anticipated by the text itself – an ideal reader equipped with the reading skills and knowledge needed to generate insightful responses to the text. Students also need to realise that the ideal or intended reader is a construct that changes through history according to changing assumptions about childhood and children's literature. Such learning outcomes can only be achieved through combining a historically-based approach that tracks the history of children's literature alongside the history of changing ideas about children and childhood with close attention to the formal and rhetorical techniques of specific texts. The dominant image of childhood at the historical moment of a text's production may influence not only the represented actions and subject matter, but also the level of linguistic and literary competence required of the implied reader. In other words, studying children's literature at university involves paying close attention to what used to be the central concern of the academic study of literature in general – the formal devices and textual strategies of literary texts.

My children's literature class begins by considering (and rejecting) Philippe Ariès's argument in *Centuries of Childhood* (1960) that the concept of childhood did not emerge until after the Middle Ages. The class nonetheless recognises that literature written for children is a relatively recent development. The fact that John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563) and the Bible were considered to be suitable books for

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children in seventeenth-century England and America tells us a lot about the Puritan view of childhood, but we need to recall that neither text was written for children. Books written for children began to emerge in the seventeenth-century driven by Puritan concerns about childhood and the human condition in general. John Bunyan's 'The Awakened Child's Lamentation', a lyric from his *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686), reveals a view of childhood which seems utterly alien in the 21st century:

When Adam was deceived,
I was of life bereaved;
Of late (too) I perceived,
I was in sin conceived ...
When other Children prayed,
That work I then delayed,
Ran up and down and played;
And thus from God have strayed'.¹

These lines invite the child reader to adopt the subject position of the poem's speaker, inducing the child to accept that he or she was born in sin and to recognise that childhood ought to be spent praying rather than playing.

Students can easily assume that such alien views about childhood are simply wrong and that we now know what childhood really is or ought to be like. In order to unsettle such assumptions, my class works its way through the history of children's literature from the eighteenth century to the present, looking at how key children's books reflect and promote decisive shifts in historical views about childhood. Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749), for example, is read in terms of its engagement with John Locke's ideas about childhood and children's reading in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). In this massively influential text, Locke rejects the assumption that children are inherently sinful and in need of salvation and claims instead that children's ideas and character are shaped by experience and education and that children's natural impulses can be used to develop reason and moral virtue. Refuting the Puritan view of children, Locke 'consider[s] them as Children, who must be tenderly used, who must play, and have Play-things' and advises that 'the chief Art is, to make all that they have to do, Sport and Play too'.²

Locke's view of childhood was drawn on and transformed in Rousseau's *Emile: or, On Education* (1762), a philosophical novel cum educational treatise which emphasises the difference between childhood and adulthood and promotes a natural education in which children

learn primarily from practical outdoor activities rather than through reading. Rousseau's natural education became the basis of the Romantic ideal of the innocent child at home in the natural world – an image that still persists in our culture's views about ideal childhood (in modern children's literature, the ideal childhood setting is still in the countryside).

The Romantic idea of the innocent child affected not only the content of children's literature but also shaped what Alan Richardson has called 'the poetics of innocence' – the assumption that narrative technique, plot structure, figurative language, and so on should match the assumed reading competence of the innocent child reader. When post-Romantic children's books such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter and Wendy* employ literary techniques that violate the poetics of innocence we are forced to ask whether such books reconfigure the child reader as more 'knowing' or whether they are designed to work on different levels for different readerships (meaning that some children's books have levels of meaning and technique that are beyond the child reader). Since the 1970s, texts written for children have increasingly presented images of children, and assumed child readers, who are more 'knowing', in every way, than some adults feel comfortable with. Roald Dahl's 'Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf' (1995), for example, relies for its impact on the child reader having an intertextual knowledge of other versions of 'Little Red Riding Hood' together with knowledge of the connotations of Little Red Riding Hood killing the wolf with a pistol that she whips out from her knickers.

The historical approach to studying children's literature reveals that these successive ideas about childhood don't represent a gradual progression towards an understanding of the true essence of childhood, but a sequence of different constructs that remain in conflict with one another. The Romantic child, for example, taken up by Blake and Wordsworth, was just one competing view in the Romantic period. The Romantic idea of the child still persists, if only as a nostalgic ideal (children's books are typically set in the past as well as in the countryside) that is perceived to be under threat from images of violence and the sexualisation of children that are increasingly disseminated through an increasing variety of electronic media. But it is adults (perhaps rightly) who worry about the impact of these developments on modern childhood (just as Socrates worried about the negative impact of certain kinds of stories on the children of classical Athens and

the Puritans worried about the impact of fairy stories on seventeenth century children).

For adults, it seems, childhood is always under threat. Such anxieties are most powerfully mobilised in the negative reactions of some adult critics to books like Melvin Burgess's *Doing It* (2003). Anne Fine's condemnation of the novel as 'filth' is rejected by most of Burgess's intended young adult readers, who tend to celebrate its 'authentic' representation of modern Western urban childhood and young adulthood. The debate about the representation of violence and sexual activity in novels aimed at children and young adults from the 1970s onwards thus exposes a modern disparity between dominant adult ideas about childhood and the way that many children and young adults perceive themselves and their childhood. Attention to this disparity allows us to reflect on whether children's literature should represent modern childhood experience like it is or how many adults feel it ought to be. If we were to accept the view that adults know best, then we would be saying that children and young adults don't have the literary competence or life experience to cope with some of books that they care about most passionately.

It is also important to recognise that most of the images of childhood that appear in children's literature up to the middle of the twentieth century construct the child as white and middle-class. The ideal childhood imagined in such literature excludes and was not available to most children in Britain, Europe and the USA during the 'golden age of childhood'. Indeed, Blake and Dickens use the Romantic ideal in order to contrast the lives of poverty and hard labour endured by most children in Britain in the period. As well as representing the lives of poor and working-class children, children's literature in the twentieth century began to challenge the dominant image of childhood by representing the childhoods of non-white children in Britain and the USA. Today, a quarter of a billion children from all parts of the globe are forced by extreme poverty to work in exploitative and dangerous conditions and thus robbed of what we take to be an authentic childhood. The emergence of what we might call post-colonial children's literature in the work of novelists such as Jamila Gavin and others has begun to represent and construct the lives of such children and, as a consequence, further challenged the image of childhood that dominated children's literature for much of its history.

Tracing the history of children's literature alongside the history of childhood reveals that we need to focus on children's literature as a

set of *literary* texts that make use of the same kinds of literary forms and techniques – narrative point of view, focalisation, tone, genre, plot structure, figurative language and intertextuality – that are found in literature written for adults. As I have suggested, literary technique is intrinsically connected with assumptions about the intended child reader's literary competence and worldly knowledge. Yet literary techniques may also shape readers' responses to texts without their awareness and the analysis of literary technique may thus reveal the ways in which a text may be manipulating the child reader or saying things or playing games that are beyond that reader. The literary techniques of *Peter and Wendy* are at once playful and disturbing in this respect. In general, however, a history of literary technique in children's literature might well reveal that writers of children's literature have assumed an ever more sophisticated literary competence in their readers, along with an increasing knowledge about and interest in questions of history, politics, sexuality, and so on. Such a trend runs precisely counter to the tendency to assume that children's reading ability and attention spans are on the decline and that we are facing the end of the book along with the end of childhood.

In this respect, the huge success of novels such as Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, which makes ambitious assumptions about its readers' literary competence, intertextual knowledge and interest in big ideas, might give cause for optimism. Such optimism should be tempered, however, by the fact that even university students of English may need to be alerted to some of the intellectual issues that Pullman's novels are dealing with and some of the literary techniques they employ. The attempt to inculcate literary competence remains a pedagogical imperative – whether we are reading to young children or teaching children's literature at university.

Notes

- 1 John Bunyan, *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686) (Oakhill, Somerset: The Oakhill Press, 1987), pp.10-11.
- 2 John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. John W. and Jean S. Yolton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.108, 120.



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