

these enlightened times. Few today would champion *Little Black Sambo* or *Rufy Tuffy* or the *Doctor Dolittle* books or "The Inky Boys." Some even warn against such characters as Curious George and Babar. Obviously, no one person, young or old, can read everything; as educators, we select materials for the children and young people we teach. Given the historical moment we live in, we might make a strong argument, as Hunt does, for presenting our young with current books, which manifest what he calls "live issues." However, just what these live issues that Hunt has in mind are remains unclear to me. I agree that it is important to introduce children to contemporary works that take seriously the multicultural world we inhabit, but I also think a look at and a discussion of a work such as *Little Black Sambo* (especially in conjunction with a consideration of recent and more positive retellings of

this story) can do much to teach tolerance. Reading Rudyard Kipling or Frances Hodgson Burnett or Lewis Carroll or others through the lens of feminist and postcolonial theories can only serve to enhance our understanding of our past and the development of our own cultural moment. Children deserve to know this past, whether it is laudable or deplorable. We do them no service to assume that they might find texts from the past difficult and therefore "inaccessible."

I offer these introductory remarks as incentive. My hope is that the "gloriously arguable" points Peter Hunt makes about books old and books young, and about the division in our ranks between what we might think of as traditional scholars and less dusty critics who deal with live issues, will generate response. Does the study of children's literature divide between the "adultists" and the "childists"?

## Passing on the Past: The Problem of Books That Are for Children and That Were for Children

by Peter Hunt

It doesn't do to be disrespectful about the past. In *Criticism, Theory and Children's Literature*, I made what I thought was a necessary distinction:

There are "live" books and "dead" books, books which no longer concern their primary audience (and [which] concern no-one else except historians). . . . Concepts of childhood change so rapidly that there is a sense in which books no longer applicable to childhood must fall into a limbo in which they are the preserve of the bibliographer, since they are of no interest to the current . . . child. . . . The history of the children's book may be interesting to the adult, but not for the child, and it is this dichotomy which is central [to defining children's books]. (61-62)

In *An Introduction to Children's Literature*, I elaborated this view:

Reading a text "for children" from the eighteenth century is roughly equivalent to reading Middle English poetry in the original: it may be rewarding for the specialist, but unless it is translated and modernized, it has little to offer the general reader. All children, I would submit, are in the position of being "general readers." The division between books that *were* for children and which *are* for children is, as I have suggested, a very useful one. (28)

Not necessarily.

Perry Nodelman, in a highly professional review of the first book, took me to task. My approach, he observed,

not only generalizes wildly about the historical interests of children but also, presumably in the interests of practicality, closes off the sort of analysis of alternate versions of childhood that [Hunt] might have been able to explore, and that therefore might well have enriched his understanding of how books children *do* currently read work to construct highly specific forms of childhood subjectivity. (39)

Well, it might, and that's a view worth discussing—rather more than a scurrilous and unprofessional review of the second book, which accused me of being "out of sympathy" with the past and therefore, by implication, consigned me to the Yahoo camp (Avery iv).

But I would like to make, or re-make, the case that within the ambit of the subject of "Children's Literature" there are two quite different studies operating, with different assumptions and different methodologies and ideologies: the study of books that *are* for children, and the study of books that *were* for children. This is not always acknowledged—indeed, it is resisted—because literary and historical studies have generally had the higher academic status, and "Children's Literature" has generally found it necessary to attach itself to the "respectable" in order to survive. Equally, it is assumed that there is a flow, a stream of history, that connects all books written for children, and that we in the present can learn from the past about books and children.

Both those views seem to me to be worth challenging.

To challenge the second is perhaps the more contentious. I must hasten to say that I am not out of sympathy with the

past: I am out of sympathy with a view that venerates it, and holds its books to be more valuable than those of the present. (We might view the sorting process that is "literature" as simply an admission of our failure to cope with the vast variety of texts.) But I think that we should recognize that the idea of a continuum of literature, in which subject matter or mode shifts along with childhood—and which is therefore related to, and useful for, the modern study/child/academic—is suspect. The idea of a literary continuum assumes some continuity of readership and some continuity of medium: in the case of children and books, these continua only *appear* to exist. Nodelman is obviously right that books at various times past did very different things, but whether what they did (supposing that it were knowable) can actually inform our present practice is another thing. History is marked by fractures, chasms, which readers cannot in the natural way of things cross, and this is particularly true of the history of children's literature and reading.

Childhood is the most elusive of concepts: it differs virtually from house to house and from day to day; our grasp of *historical* childhoods is—for obvious socio-historical reasons—very flimsy indeed. So much so, in fact, that we tend to deduce the characteristics of childhood from the literature written *for* it—which is a very questionable process, given the adult-child power-relationship. We can be fairly sure, though, that there have been huge changes in "childhood" between 1590, 1690, 1790, 1890, and 1990.

And, of course, books have changed too, and I do not mean simply in terms of form. Let's take an example: the dichotomy between the study of books that *were* for children and that *are* for children is perhaps best represented by the chapbooks. They are the subject of fascinated and (to some) fascinating academic study; their bibliographic, historical, and socio-cultural potential has hardly been touched. But to the current child (and here I am constructing a generalization with some confidence) they are inaccessible—that is, they are crude to the point of imbecility, in both form and content. That much is obvious, but what is not so obvious is that much the same applies well into the nineteenth century—and perhaps later: for all that the books seem to look like the books of today, and have stories that seem not too far from those of today, they were different phenomena in a different cultural context.

And this is where the discontinuities of literary and social history meet. It is difficult to imagine the impact of a chapbook on a child four hundred years ago; was it the equivalent of the impact of a virtual-reality CD hologram on the child of today? Similarly, the novel of the eighteenth or nineteenth century addresses not only a concept of childhood that is very different from ours, but also a concept of reading/interacting/of the book/of the medium that is very different from ours. Now, that circumstance may be interesting historically, just as, say, the typefaces of the chapbooks are interesting for the history of typefaces. But that complex and challenging

study has much less to tell the practitioners of today than is commonly assumed.

In short, while books of the more recent past may seem superficially to address modern childhood, they do not actually do so. One only has to glance at the wholesale re-interpretations by film producers of *The Secret Garden* or *A Little Princess*, or at virtually anything by Walt Disney, to see that this is so. Similarly, literary traditions manifested in the generic characteristics and expectations that so condition the reading of books by experienced adult readers are virtually inoperable for less experienced readers. Consequently, if we could regard books that *were* for and *are* for children as distinct, we might see that there are two quite different value-systems at work, and two quite different critical and theoretical methodologies appropriate to them.

You may say that there are many borderline cases, neither dead nor alive, enjoyed by some children and sustained by adults: *Uncle Remus*, the *Alice* books, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Water Babies*, and folk tales in general. These are perhaps the most interesting, but they make my point in that they are now being directed *at* childhood, rather than being *of* childhood. (Fairy tales, the majority of which have to be severely bowdlerized, make the same point.) Can, say, the excellent Oxford edition of *The Princess and the Goblin* be said to have anything to do with a contemporary child?

At this point, I feel that I should defend myself against the accusation of "presentism." Presentism—the devaluing of history—implies that we lose our culture, and we repeat the mistakes of the past; if the teaching of history is virtually nonexistent, for example, it is possible for people to deny that the Holocaust actually happened—with horrific implications. Not only would I deplore the idea of ignoring history, but I would say that I am a fervent traditionalist—I would argue that the best children's book of the century may well be *The Stone Book Quartet*, in which Alan Garner celebrates the presence of the past. But, equally, I believe in the preservation of *all* cultures, rather than *the* "culture"; after all, books are generally burned by people whose own cultures have been degraded.

Consequently, I do not take a romantic view of the past (which is, of course, a rampant and endemic feature of those children's books which adults are inclined to valorize). My mother and father were, respectively, on the edge of the urban and rural working class, and my own memory of rural life in the 1940s (which had scarcely changed in two hundred years) was that it was oppressive and oppressing, hard, damp, cold, and smelly; those who survived were tough in a way it is hard to imagine now. All the men I knew could do almost anything, but the fact that they could do so was a matter of survival rather than of love, and the favorite verb (this is south Leicestershire) was "to mackle up," which is a little better than "botch," and implies a good deal of expediency and ingenuity, and not a lot of craft or pride.

Similarly, I do not take a romantic or reverential view of books from the past. Certainly the books, the objects, should be preserved (even, perhaps, treasured), but to accord them some superior status simply because of their age or supposed historical significance seems to me to be a serious error. Equally, to regard bibliographers and historians as the custodians of the foundations of the subject, and as "real" rather than "speculative" researchers, obscures our understanding of books, childhood and the meanings generated between them (see Hunt, "Researching"; "Scholars").

I would argue, then, that the study of past books requires and implies different skills from the study of books currently read by live children. Of course, it might at first sight seem that this division is already manifest: books that *are* for children are studied in education schools, books that *were* for children are studied in literature departments. (Or, to put it another way, *children's children's books* are studied in education, and *adults' children's books* in literature departments). But this is precisely the problem: the philosophy and methodology of the higher status literature departments have dominated, even though they are often more concerned with the book than the interaction; are wedded to concepts of canon and to certain value systems (male, white, adult); and are essentially adultist and universalist. Those who work with books and children find themselves always in the shadow of "the classic" or "the great"—terms implying values that, like the concept of "literature" itself, are inappropriate to the subject (see Hunt, "Criticism").

In order to survive academically, "Children's Literature"—with its conferences and journals and papers and theory—has played the adult game, valuing history above the new challenges of literary interaction. It has, consequently, equipped us with some sterile and inappropriate attitudes. We should think seriously of turning the present situation around—to say that the study of books that *are* for children is the primary, interdisciplinary, intercultural, intellectually challenging, innovative, and unselfconscious center of our study. We may draw on that historical and historico-socio-critical matrix that is the study of *past* children's books, but *that* study, far from being the root or the foundation of our work, is in fact a subdivision of historical and literary studies, and has little connection with our study of *today*.

History = literature = respectable (precisely because it does not relate to that very childish thing, childhood—that is, a *real, individual* childhood); literature is an adult province, of libraries, rare and expensive *untouchable* books; it is the province of the academic and the collector interested in the sociology of childhood, or the development of printing techniques, or the development of literary trends; it is, essentially,

abstract and inward looking; it looks to the minutiae of books, and universals of culture, and although historicists may disagree, that history has, at least, *happened*.

Contemporary, child-oriented literary studies are quite different; here we are talking about childhood, about *use*, about books being touched, eaten, rejected, banned, pulped—in short, about *live* issues. For example, that John Newbery produced trash of the worst commercial order is historically scarcely mentioned, because it is part of a historical process, because the books are rare, and because they show us the development of printing through the reuse of woodcuts, or of different printers and so on. In contrast, that the Ninja Turtles or the Power Rangers or Sonic the Hedgehog or "Point Horror" galvanize our children is not a matter of abstract curiosity; it is a matter that has to be understood and confronted.

Children's books do different things at different times, and it is at least questionable to assume that they can constitute, diachronically, a cohesive subject. All of this, of course, is gloriously arguable. What is not so arguable is one of the implications. Too often we do not acknowledge that "children's literature" is a big subject; we cannot be experts in "children's literature" any more than anyone would be an expert in the whole of "literature." If we do not acknowledge that theory and history and the application of texts may inform each other but are *not* the same, then we are dooming the whole subject.

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