

## Postmodern Pooh (review)

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(Review)

### **Frederick Crews. *Postmodern Pooh*. New York: North Point P, 2001.**

In *Postmodern Pooh*, Frederick Crews has gathered together a brilliant collection of eleven theoretically informed essays that capture contemporary Pooh Studies in all its rich diversity and complexity. This critical anthology will help to establish Pooh Studies as a significant aspect of literary studies much in the same way that Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler's *Cultural Studies* (1992) helped to popularize the practices of Cultural Studies in the United States. While these essays will be of great value to literary critics, they could also be of interest to many readers beyond the academy (we hope!).

Crews's essays are presented as if they were the polished versions of the papers presented by a group of star academics at a Pooh panel from last year's MLA conference in Washington, D.C. *Postmodern Pooh* is an extremely clever and wicked updating of his earlier *The Pooh Perplex: A Freshman Casebook* (1963), in which Crews poked fun at the current literary trends of the day. How things change, but remain the same! As Crews explains in the preface, the once popular casebook that was widely used in freshman English courses has gone the way of the dinosaur, but anthologies of theoretical essays that teach the conflicts are now all the

rage. What Crews has done in updating *The Pooh Perplex* is to add critical approaches based on deconstruction, feminism, new historicism, cultural studies, and postcolonialism that weren't included in the original collection. Crews taught in the English Department at the University of California at Berkeley from 1958 to 1994 and is the author of a number of scholarly works, so it is not surprising that he has a good ear for various critical discourses. I'm not sure if this is the sort of playfulness of language that Helene Cixous had in mind in "The Laugh of the Medusa," but I found this to be one of the funniest critiques of the academy since David Lodge's *Small World* (1984). While the essays in *Postmodern Pooh* are not as comprehensive as Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan's *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (1998) or the ever-popular and constantly revised *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1985) by Raman Selden, which has become a sort of Cliff's Notes to critical theory, it is much more fun to read.

Crews mentions that over the years he had been encouraged by readers of *The Pooh Perplex* to update the collection. Obviously, a great deal of new critical theory generated in the intervening thirty-eight years. When I taught a graduate course called "Critical Theories of Children's Literature" I had the bright idea of using *The Pooh Perplex* as one of the assignments, then having students create parodies of recent critical theories. In addition to Crews's text, the seminar was going to read several other collections of critical essays dealing with children's texts, such as Peter Hunt's *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism* (1990) and *Literature for Children's Contemporary Criticism* (1992), as well as Shelia Egoff's *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, 3rd edition (1996). Since successful parody pays careful attention to the original text, I thought it would be a useful exercise to have the students create their own parodies of critical approaches to *Pooh* using a theory that Crews hadn't already used in *The Pooh Perplex*. It was only after I submitted the book order that I realized *The Pooh Perplex* was out of print. But I was able to put a few copies of it on reserve and the students were enthusiastic in trying to outdo Crews. One of the class favorites was a queer reading of Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad Are Friends* (1970) entitled "Frog and Toad Are More Than Just Friends." The essay turned out to be clever and entertaining, but also a surprisingly insightful interpretation of the text—just as good criticism ought to be.

But scholars in children's literature have often felt ambivalent toward *The Pooh Perplex*. Alison Lurie has suggested in *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (1990), that writing about the Pooh books has been "awkward" after the publication of *The Pooh Perplex* in

that “it is not often that a satirical work achieves such success that it effectively destroys its subject, but Crews almost managed it” (146). Lurie suggests that Crews had so successfully managed to parody the current literary criticism that “he did manage to stifle almost all critical comments on Winnie-the-Pooh for a decade” (146). Despite Crews’s primary goal of poking fun at the excesses of critical approaches, Lurie also acknowledged that he simultaneously managed to say “most of what could be said about Pooh in one disguise or another” (146). No children’s literature critic wants to end up sounding like a Crews parody.

So why did Crews decide on using Pooh books as the basis of his parodies of critical discourse when children’s literature isn’t one of his research areas? I suspect one possible reason might be the flip side of a quotation that Peter Hunt uses to introduce the first chapter of his *Criticism, Theory, and Children’s Literature* (1991). As an epigram, Hunt cites Aidan Chambers, “I have often wondered why literary theorists haven’t yet realized that the best demonstration of all they say when they talk about phenomenology or structuralism or deconstruction or any other critical approach can be most clearly and easily demonstrated in children’s literature” (5). What Crews is trying to suggest in both of his *Pooh* books is that the best way to show the limitations or flaws of a critical approach is to apply it to a children’s text.

There is one significant difference between *The Pooh Perplex* and *Postmodern Pooh*, which is found in the footnotes. As the architect Mies van der Rohe was credited with saying, “God is in the details.” Unlike the first collection, in which the notes were attributed to imaginary scholars, in *Postmodern Pooh* Crews names names and quotes established critics. The quotations are from actual texts—you can look them up. Critics such as Edward Said, Jacques Derrida, Jonathan Culler, Frederic Jameson, Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha are held up to ridicule. Hardly any children’s literature scholars are referred to, but when they are, such as Ann Thwaite, they are treated respectfully. The one exception is Ellen Spitz’s *Inside Picture Books* (1999), which is mocked. Whereas the imaginary scholars in *The Pooh Perplex* were representative of schools of criticism, *Postmodern Pooh* takes direct aim at specific critics. It doesn’t take very long to recognize that “Orpheus Bruno,” the critic who argues that Pooh does for children’s literature what Shakespeare does for literature at large, is Harold Bloom. Who else earned his reputation with the revision of British Romanticism with critical studies such as *The Breaking of the Wind*, his iconic study of the Aeolian harp? Very funny, but a bit mean-spirited. The same is true of the neoconservative rant at all things politically correct by “Dudley Cravat

III," who is carefully modeled on Roger Kimball. "Cravat" critiques the academic excesses of the MLA, just as Kimball does, by quoting the titles of MLA sessions.

There is an obvious ideological agenda behind *Postmodern Pooh*, and in many ways it is closer in spirit to Crews's *The Critics Bear It Away: American Fiction and the Academy* (1992) than it is to *The Pooh Perplex*. In *The Critics Bear It Away*, which won the PEN prize for the best book of previously uncollected essays, Crews examines the ways in which American novelists were being "apprehended and misapprehended in the academy," showing nonacademic readers the shifts of opinions in English departments (xiii). Many of the same critical approaches that are parodied in *Postmodern Pooh* are critiqued for their ideological misuse of texts; *The Critics Bear It Away* would be an appropriate subtitle for *Postmodern Pooh*, "bear" becoming the subject rather than a verb. Indeed, Crews makes a guest appearance in the final essay in *Postmodern Pooh* and gives himself the last critical word in the guise of "N. Mack Hobbs," the great scholar-critic of Princeton, who organized this academic super-session of Pooh Studies at the MLA. "Hobbs" also happens to be America's highest paid humanities professor, whose autobiography is entitled *Soldier in the War on Poverty*, and is the author of *The Last Theory Book You'll Ever Need to Read*. But as Hobbs/Crews argues, *Winnie-the-Pooh* is a classic not because it is full of Western values, but because it is one of those texts that "keeps on facilitating professional discourse production" (165). While Crews has great fun lampooning critical theory, it is his hypertext critic, who goes by the scholarly nom de plume "BigGloria3," who shows how simple it is to force a theory onto a text, but who also warns the reader, "Getting your favorite jollies from the text is a snap, but when you've finished and are showering off the slime, nothing has happened that means diddly-squat to anybody but you" (138). By selectively quoting and ignoring what doesn't fit a theory, "BigGloria3" shows how simple it is to produce a gay reading that turns *Winnie-the-Pooh* into a pornographic text, but warns, "this kind of stunt is too easy to tell you anything real" (136). After reading this essay, it comes as no surprise that Dutton and the Trustees of the Pooh Properties declined Crews permission to reprint Ernest Shepard's drawings to accompany the essays in *Postmodern Pooh*.

Hobbs/Crews says that in assembling the eleven "seductively argued but incompatible takes on *Pooh*" one of his goals has been to acknowledge the obsolete goal of determining a text's meaning (170). Crews argues in his conclusion that once postmodernism has shown that all knowledge is socially constructed, all that's left is rhetoric (171). Crews

maintains that after postmodernism, there is “no such thing as evidence for a reading and that evidence, like theory, is just publicity for a stand already taken” (168). Confirming the academic success of Stanley Fish, Crews concludes, “But you gotta do what you gotta do if you want your academic unit to be everybody’s buzz and the same rule applies to the field as a whole” (168). *Postmodern Pooh* is an insider’s look at critical theory and what it tells and doesn’t tell us about the text. These clever parodies suggest that literary criticism frequently reveals more about the critic than about the text being examined.

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