I Introduction

The expanding world of Children’s Literature Studies

Peter Hunt

So what good is literary theory? Will it keep our children singing? Well perhaps not. But understanding something of literary theory will give us some understanding of how the literature we give to our children works. It might also keep us engaged with the texts that surround us, keep us singing even if it is a more mature song than we sang as youthful readers of texts. As long as we keep singing, we have a chance of passing along our singing spirit to those we teach.

(McGillis 1996: 206)

Children’s literature

‘Children’s literature’ sounds like an enticing field of study; because children’s books have been largely beneath the notice of intellectual and cultural gurus, they are (apparently) blissfully free of the ‘oughts’: what we ought to think and say about them. More than that, to many readers, children’s books are a matter of private delight, which means, perhaps, that they are real literature – if ‘literature’ consists of texts which engage, change, and provoke intense responses in readers.

But if private delight seems a somewhat indefensible justification for a study, then we can reflect on the direct or indirect influence that children’s books have, and have had, socially, culturally, and historically. They are overtly important educationally and commercially – with consequences across the culture, from language to politics: most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority of those in positions of power and influence, read children’s books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development.

The books have, none the less, been marginalised. Childhood is, after all, a state we grow away from, while children’s books – from writing to publication to interaction with children – are the province of that culturally marginalised group, females. But this marginalisation has had certain advantages; because it has been culturally low-profile, ‘children’s literature’ has not become the ‘property’ of any group or discipline: it does not ‘belong’ to the Department of Literature or the Library School, or the local parents’ organisation. It is attractive and interesting to students (official or unofficial) of literature, education, library studies, history, psychology, art, popular culture, media, the caring professions, and so on, and it can be approached from any specialist viewpoint. Its nature, both as a group of texts and as a subject for study, has been to break down barriers between disciplines, and between types of readers. And as a group of texts it is at once one of the liveliest and most original of the arts, and the site of the crudest commercial exploitation.

This means that, just as children’s books do not exist in a vacuum (they have real,
argumentative readers and visible, practical, consequential uses), so the theory of children’s literature constantly blends into the practice of bringing books and readers together.

The slightly uncomfortable (or very inspiring) corollary of this is that we have to accept that children’s books are complex, and the study of them infinitely varied. Many students around the world who have been enticed onto children’s literature courses at all ‘levels’ rapidly find that things are more complicated than they had assumed. There cannot be many teachers of children’s literature who have not been greeted with a querulous ‘But it’s only a children’s book’, ‘Children won’t see that in it’, or ‘You’re making it more difficult than it should be’. But the complexities are not mere problematising by academics eager to secure their meal tickets; the most apparently straightforward act of communication is amazingly intricate – and we are dealing here with fundamental questions of communication and understanding between adults and children, or, more exactly, between individuals.

If children’s literature is more complex than it seems, even more complex, perhaps, is the position it finds itself in, between adult writers, readers, critics and practitioners, and child readers. Children’s literature is an obvious point at which theory encounters real life, where we are forced to ask: what can we say about a book, why should we say it, how can we say it, and what effect will what we say have? We are also forced to confront our preconceptions. Many people will deny that they were influenced by their childhood reading (‘I read xyz when I was a child, and it didn’t do me any harm’), and yet these may be the same people who accept that childhood is an important phase in our lives (as is almost universally acknowledged), and that children are vulnerable, susceptible, and must be protected from manipulation. Children’s literature is important – and yet it is not.

Consequently, before setting off to explore the somewhat tangled jungle that is ‘children’s literature’, we need to establish some basic concepts, ideas, and methods: to work through fundamental arguments, to look at which techniques of criticism, which discourses, and which strategies are appropriate to – or even unique to – our subject. It can be argued that we can (and should) harness the considerable theoretical and analytical apparatus of every discipline from philosophy to psychotherapy; or that we should evolve a critical theory and practice tailored to the precise needs of ‘children’s literature’.

This book, which selects key essays from the second edition of the International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature, provides the essential theory for any adventure into ‘children’s literature’, outlines some practical approaches, suggests areas of research, and provides up-to-date bibliographies to help readers to find their own, individual, appropriate paths.

**Literature and children**

All the writers in this book share an unspoken conviction that children’s literature is worth reading, worth discussing, and worth thinking about for adults. Aidan Chambers has summed up the motivation of many ‘liberal humanist’ teachers and writers:

> I belong to the demotic tradition; I believe literature belongs to all the people all the time, that it ought to be cheaply and easily available, that it ought to be fun to read as well as challenging, subversive, refreshing, comforting, and all the other qualities we claim for it. Finally, I hold that in literature we find the best expression of the human imagination, and the most useful means by which we come to grips with our ideas about ourselves and what we are.

(Chambers 1985: 16)
Such a faith in literature underlies a great deal of day-to-day teaching and thinking about children and books; it lies behind the connection between literature and literacy, whether or not children’s books are seen as valuable in themselves, or as stepping-stones to higher things (to ‘adult’ or ‘great’ literature).

Chambers’s statement is, however, clearly not neutral: it embodies some very obvious (and some not-so-obvious) ideology (aspects of ideology are considered in Chapter 3), and it brings us up against the question of what is ‘literature’. Oceans of ink have been spilt on this matter, but it is essential to recognise that there is no such thing as ‘literary’ quality or value inherent in any set of words on a page. As Jonathan Culler sums it up, ‘Literature … is a speech act or textual event that elicits certain kinds of attention’ (1997: 27) – or, better, which is accorded a certain value by those members of the culture who are in a position to accord values.

This is fundamental to children’s literature, where practitioners (those who work with books and children, and who generally have more pressing concerns than subtle theoretical nuances) want to know – as simply as possible – what is good? The shadow of what they ‘ought’ to value lies over them, and it is difficult to convince many people that ‘good’ doesn’t belong to somebody else – to the great ‘they’. Outside academia, arguments about what is ‘good’ very often collapse into a rather weary ‘well, it’s all a matter of taste’. But people are usually a little uneasy – or defiant – about that, as if somebody, somewhere, knows better than they do what is ‘good’ (and they don’t necessarily like it) (see Hunt 1997).

This leads to the common situation that people will privately like, or value, one type of book, while publicly recommending something else. Books which would have low status on some cosmic value-scale (and which are highly successful commercially, notably J. K. Rowling’s ‘Harry Potter’ series) are excluded from serious consideration (see Hunt 2001: 122–4; Zipes 2001: 170–89). Others – the ‘classics’, perhaps – are taught and prescribed and written about. In primary and secondary education, this can lead to a backlash against reading: if children read one kind of book in school, and another kind outside school, then certain books may be regarded by them as ‘other’ (see Chapter 11).

This division leads to inappropriate critical approaches being taken to the books. Children’s books are different from adults’ books: they are written for a different audience, with different skills, different needs, and different ways of reading; equally, children experience texts in ways which are often unknowable, but which many of us strongly suspect to be very rich and complex. If we judge children’s books (even if we do it unconsciously) by the same value systems as we use for adult books – in comparison with which they are bound by definition to emerge as lesser – then we give ourselves unnecessary problems. To say that, for example, Judy Blume is not as good a writer as Jane Austen is not to compare like with like, and presupposes an innate superiority in the latter. ‘Literature’, then, is only a useful concept if we want to educate children into a particular kind of culture: but it can be misleading or pernicious if we are ‘using’ the texts in other ways.

If the word ‘literature’ presents obvious problems, the word ‘children’ proves to be equally slippery. The notion of childhood changes from place to place, from time to time, and the history, definition, and study of childhood as a concept has burgeoned in recent years, as in Chris Jenks’s *Childhood* (1996), Colin Heywood’s *A History of Childhood* (2001), and Carol Garhart Mooney’s *Theories of Childhood* (2000) (and see also Cunningham 1995, and, in a lighter but no less revealing vein, Hardyment 1995). In non-Western countries, the relationships between story and storyteller, adult and child, can be radically different from those in the West (see, for example, Pellowski 2004). Consequently, making judgements on behalf of present or past children – as those adults who work with
children and books are inclined (or bound) to do – is fraught with difficulty. This in itself
draws our attention to the gross simplifications made about peer readers in very many crit-
ical texts: with the ‘child’ reader in children’s literature, the problem of talking about ‘the
reader’, or a specific ‘reader’, should be much more obvious (see Chapter 2).

A central example of these kinds of confusion may be seen in the discussion of poetry
for children. Surely such a thing cannot exist, if we assume that ‘poetry’ is a kind of litera-
ture which is structured so as to invite or require a special kind of reading – a kind of
reading that ‘children’ (it is widely assumed) cannot provide. Neil Philip effectively demol-
ishes this proposition in his ‘Introduction’ to The New Oxford Book of Children’s Verse:

Some would argue that the very notion of poetry for children is a nonsense. . . . Yet
there is a recognisable tradition of children’s verse. It is, most crucially, a tradition of
immediate apprehension. There is in the best children’s poetry a sense of the world
being seen as if for the first time, and of language being plucked from the air to
describe it. . . . This does not necessarily mean that children’s poems are ‘simple’ in any
reductive sense. I would argue that no poem can be called a poem that does not have
at its heart some unknowable mystery.

(Philip 1996: xxv)

History, ideology, politics

It will be clear by now that both the range of children’s books and the ways in which they can
be studied are very extensive. Just as children’s books are part of the ideological structures of
the cultures of the world, so their history is constructed ideologically (some of these issues are
dealt with in Chapters 3, 4, and 8). The two most obvious constructions of history are from
an Anglocentric viewpoint, and from a male viewpoint (although, of course, those ‘viewpoints’
are far from stable). Other constructions of history – such as a feminist, gay, or ‘childist’
approach – wait to be written, although much progress has been made in the first of these with
books such as Lynne Vallone’s Disciplines of Virtue. Girls’ Culture in the Eighteenth and
Nineteenth Centuries (1995), Roberta Seelinger Trites’s evangelical Waking Sleeping Beauty:
Feminist Voices in Children’s Novels (1997), Christine Wilkie-Stibbs’s The Feminine Subject in
Children’s Literature (2002), and Beverly Lyon Clark and Margaret Higonnet’s Girls, Boys,
Books, Toys: Gender in Children’s Literature and Culture (1999) (and see Chapter 8).

Children’s books have a long history around the world, and they have absorbed into
themselves elements of folk, fairy tale, and the oral tradition. In many places, such as parts
of Africa, they have a post-colonial tinge, and an uneasy relationship with indigenous
culture; elsewhere, they have seemed sufficiently important to totalitarian states as to suffer
severe censorship. It is also possible to perceive similar patterns throughout the world –
although it is clearly possible to challenge a wide-ranging view such as this, by Sheila Ray:

In the early stages of a printed literature, there are few or no books published specifi-
cally for children. There are perhaps a few books intended for broadly educational
purposes, such as the courtesy or behaviour books printed in the fifteenth or sixteenth
centuries in European countries, or the twentieth-century text books published to
support the formal school curriculum in developing countries. In this situation, chil-
dren, as they learn to read, also take over adult books which appeal to them, a process
helped by the fact that the early printed literature in any society is likely to draw on
traditional stories which contain elements which appeal to every age group. Religion
is also an important factor ... Gradually stories written specially for children begin to appear ... [and eventually] demands for books to meet a variety of interests and special needs emerge. One of the problems which face developing countries in the twenty-first century is that they are expected to go through all the stages in a relatively short space of time – thirty or forty years at most – whereas European countries have taken five hundred years over the same process.

(Ray 2004: II, 850)

If a recognisable children’s literature requires a recognisable childhood, and should not be totally shared with adults, then we might argue that English-language children’s books only emerged in the eighteenth century, with British publishers such as Mary Cooper and John Newbery. The first book ‘especially prepared for North American youth’, John Cotton’s *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes*, was printed in London in 1646 (Griswold 2004: II, 1270); in India, children’s books began in Calcutta with the establishment of the School Book Society by missionaries in 1817 (Jafa 2004: II, 1078), and the earliest children’s book in Malayalam (spoken in Kerala), *Cherupaithangalkku Upakaratham Kathakal* (c. 1824), contained stories translated from English (Jafa 2004: II, 1083). This dominance by the English language has continued: in 1988, half the children’s books published in France were translations from English (Bouvaist 1990: 30). (In contrast, France was the dominant influence upon German children’s books.) Today, the traffic between English and other languages remains virtually one-way (Hunt 2000: 107–11).

The earliest books for children were, as in Ray’s formulation, based on traditional materials, or overtly didactic; children’s literature in its modern form is largely a nineteenth-century phenomenon. For example, at the end of the eighteenth century in the Netherlands there was a rapid growth in fiction for children; whereas in Spain, despite translations of Grimm, Andersen, and Perrault, ‘true’ children’s books did not emerge until the end of the nineteenth century.

Thereafter, histories of children’s books worldwide demonstrate tensions between the exercise of educational, religious, and political power on the one hand, and various concepts associated with ‘freedom’ (notably fantasy and the imagination) on the other. The literatures that result demonstrate very clearly those societies’ concepts of childhood and its power-relationship to adults. Notable English-language histories include Avery 1994 (USA); Darton 1932/1982 (England); Gilderdale 1982 (New Zealand); Hunt 1995 (England); Saxby 1969, 1971, 1993 (Australia); Townsend 1965/1990 (England).

History, as constructed, generally shows us (obviously enough) that adults can and do control the production of children’s literature – however subversive the child’s reading might be (see Chapter 6). Censorship permeates the process, operating both before and after the texts are produced, and often in bizarre circumstances. As Mark West has observed:

Throughout the history of children’s literature, the people who have tried to censor children’s books, for all their ideological differences, share a rather romantic view about the power of books. They believe, or at least profess to believe, that books are such a major influence in the formation of children’s values and attitudes that adults need to monitor nearly every word that children read.

(West 2004: II, 689)

Censorship is relative: if books are withdrawn from classrooms, as they have often been, is that being protective, or restrictive? Many of the most forceful actions taken against
books, publishers, libraries, and teachers have been in the USA by right-wing organisations, usually fundamentalist-Christian in origin. Perhaps the most famous instance has been Educational Research Analysts, a Texas-based organisation run by Mel and Norma Gabler, which analyses texts, has provided ‘evidence’ for local campaigners, and has sought to influence publishers (sometimes through state textbook-buying boards). Books which have been banned locally have included The Diary of Anne Frank, The Wizard of Oz, and adult books widely read by children and young adults such as The Catcher in the Rye – and, of course, Rowling’s ‘Harry Potter’ books (West 2004: II, 686).

The fact that children may well (or must inevitably) read ‘against’ the text (making simple cause-and-effect arguments very questionable) means that children’s books have been potentially highly subversive. One, ironic, example of their power is that, although they were tightly controlled in Nazi Germany as part of the Gleichschaltung, Erich Kästner’s classic Emil and the Detectives (1929) remained available – even though his other books had been burned by the Nazis.

Censorship tends to characterise children as impressionable and simple-minded, unable to take a balanced view of, for example, sexual or racial issues, unless the balance is explicitly stated. Judy Blume’s books, which in Forever (1975) include the first example of explicitly described sexual intercourse in a children’s book, have been widely condemned, but have been bought in huge numbers by adolescents. Attempts have been made to censor or influence writers as diverse as Beatrix Potter (undressed kittens in The Tale of Tom Kitten (1907)) or Alan Garner (unsupervised sledging in Tom Fobble’s Day (1977)). Difficulties have arisen over books which contain attitudes that were quite acceptable to the majority in their day. British examples include the racial caricatures in, for example, Hugh Lofting’s The Story of Dr Dolittle (1922), or the gender bias in Enid Blyton’s work; new editions of these books have been modified, as Britain has become increasingly multicultural and politically correct – or at least, more aware of such issues. Different cultures exercise ‘censorship’ in different ways. In Britain, it operates through selection, notably by large booksellers and wholesalers; in the USA, direct and vocal action is more the norm; elsewhere, just as totalitarian states ‘manufactured’ politically acceptable texts, so post-totalitarian (and post-colonial) societies have reacted against their previous masters.

Children’s literature, then, has its own histories, and immense influence, but this has not until recently been reflected in serious study of the form. Perhaps the most neglected area has been bibliography – the history of the books as books. As Brian Alderson has observed, ‘there can be no doubt that scientific bibliography is able to play as important a role in supporting the very varied activity which is taking place among children’s books as it does in the field of literary studies elsewhere’ (1977: 203; see also Chapter 10). However, because the study of children’s literature has been skewed towards the reader and affect, rather than towards the book as artefact, we are in the position of having a great deal of speculative and theoretical criticism but relatively little ‘solid’ bibliographical backup. How far such backup is necessary will remain a matter of debate, but with vast collections of children’s literature in libraries across the world, most of them very little used, there is immense potential for bibliographic and historical research.

**Reading children’s literature**

Because it is unwise to assume that reading and interpreting children’s books is a simple process, one of the recurrent themes in this volume is the relationship between reader and text. How far can the writer, by implying a reader (that is, a type of reader or a reader with
certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes), control what is understood from a text? How can we discover what has been understood? What are the mechanisms by which understanding is produced?

Chapter 5 of this book, ‘Analysing texts: linguistics and stylistics’, and Chapter 9, ‘Decoding the images: how picture books work’, take us to the basics of textual analysis. It is clearly important to have an understanding of text as both verbal and visual language, and this is particularly true of children’s literature – given that the primary audience is still learning about language as it uses it. The detailed and careful analyses suggested in these chapters also militate against the temptation to see children’s literature (and its readers) as an amorphous mass; what we are dealing with is individual readings and ‘literary’ readings which are not to be judged in terms of an external scale of values. As Nodelman and Reimer have noted:

Unfortunately, many readers approach texts with the idea that their themes or messages can be easily identified and stated in a few words ... Reading in this way directs attention away from the more immediate pleasures of a text ... away from other, deeper kinds of meaning the text might imply.

(Nodelman and Reimer 2003: 66)

Children’s literature studies fall between the extremes of ‘literary’ and ‘cultural’ studies. The first, as Jonathan Culler has pointed out, tends to encourage ‘close reading’, a type of reading that is ‘alert to the details of narrative structure and attends to complexities of meaning’. In contrast, cultural studies (which usually deals with ‘non-literary’ texts, such as television and children’s books) tends ‘towards “symptomatic interpretation” – that is, identifying broad, portable themes’ (Culler 1997: 52). In the context of child readers, and the power structures within children’s books that pivot on the idea that adult writers attempt to influence child readers, we might feel the need to challenge the assumptions behind both these positions. Similarly, we should look very carefully at the philosophical problem at the root of understanding reading; to take the most pragmatic and perhaps conservative viewpoint:

It is known that the reader’s understanding of a text will be conditioned by what he [sic] already knows, and by the availability of that knowledge during the reading process. Given that different purposes and motivations for reading result in different levels of processing and outcome ... it is likely that different readers will to some extent interpret different texts in varied ways. This, indeed, is notoriously the case for literary texts, where it is often said that there are as many interpretations as there are readers to interpret. Yet it is intuitively unsatisfying to claim that a text can mean anything to any reader. The text itself must to some extent condition the nature of the understanding that the reader constructs.

(Alderson and Short 1989: 72)

The complexities of how the text ‘conditions ... understanding’ are no more obvious than in the case of the picture-book – where it is often assumed that pictures are in some way ‘easier’ to interpret than words. As Scott McCloud points out in his revolutionary Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art, it is ‘nothing short of incredible’ that the human mind can understand icons – symbolic representations or abstractions from reality – as readily as it does (1993: 31, and see pp. 30–45). Picture-books cannot help but be
polyphonic; even the ‘simplest’ of them requires complex interpretative skills. What is missing is as complex an interpretative vocabulary as exists for words, although this is rapidly being supplied through the work of Nodelman (1988), Doonan (1993), Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), Anstey and Bull (2000), and others.

Underestimating the power of the picture-book (or the comic book) is tantamount to underestimating the ‘child’ as reader – which, as I hope I have demonstrated, is a central error. Jane Doonan, for example, is concerned less with the complex mechanics of reading pictures than with aesthetics:

A less common view, and the one I believe honours the picture-book most fully, holds that pictures, through their expressive powers, enable the book to function as an art object. ... The value lies ... in the aesthetic experience and the contribution the picture book can make to our aesthetic development. In an aesthetic experience we are engaged in play of the most enjoyable and demanding kind ... And in that play we have ... to deal with abstract concepts logically, intuitively and imaginatively.

(Doonan 1993: 7)

Of course, the experience of a book starts before – and goes beyond – the words or the pictures on the page. The total book-as-object is an experience, one that has become increasingly the province of the book designer: ‘each book is different and none so elementary as not to benefit from considered design. ... The designer sometimes has to take the initiative for presenting the author’s material visually and thereby transforming it into a marketable product’ (Martin 2004: II, 638).

Although we have been focusing on texts, it is obvious that the study of children’s literature involves the audience: the child, the reader, and the circumstance of reading. Text is also a context; readers are made, or un-made, by the ‘reading environment’, as Aidan Chambers has called it. Nor do ‘texts’ need to be written. As Chambers observes: ‘Storytelling is indispensable in enabling people to become literary readers’ (Chambers 1991: 46), and the study of how stories are told orally contributes to our understanding of how stories – and communication – work.

Storytelling (to return to questions of ideology, which are never very far away) also has a political axis. Jack Zipes, a distinguished American expert on children’s literature, folklore, and storytelling, believes passionately in the subversive virtues of storytelling. Schools in the West (with the collusion of society in general), he notes:

... are geared towards making children into successful consumers and competitors in a ‘free’ world dictated by market conditions. ... If storytellers are to be effective on behalf of children in schools ... it is important to try to instil a sense of community, self-reflecting and self-critical community, in the children to demonstrate how the ordinary can become extraordinary. ... Schools are an ideal setting for this ‘subversive’ type of storytelling ... if schools want ... to show that they can be other than the institutions of correction, discipline, and distraction that they tend to be.

(Zipes 1995: 6)

How a story is communicated, then, by spoken word or written word, by picture or symbol, and through whatever medium (for a discussion of film see Wojcik-Andrews (2000), Whyte (2004); and for television, Buckingham (2002)), the circumstances of that communication and the possible effects have all become an integral part of the study of
children’s literature. This means that the concerns of what might broadly be called ‘criticism’ extend beyond the traditional bounds of literary criticism, and present a singularly eclectic challenge.

**Criticising children’s literature**

There is a happy irony that people involved with the apparently simple subject of children’s literature have (often unwittingly) been at the forefront of literary and critical theory.

It has been widely argued that practitioners of children’s literature studies should not ghettoise themselves, but make use of all appropriate critical techniques. There is no shortage, as a sceptic might remark, of schools of criticism, nor of books which will outline their principles. But the fact that the work of such schools can be productively applied to children’s literature is demonstrated by Roderick McGillis’s *The Nimble Reader* (1996), which shows the relevance of schools of thought from formalism to feminism.

In the present book, five chapters (Chapter 2 and Chapters 5–8) cover the major general areas of literary theory and practice; other particularly fruitful approaches for children’s literature are those concerned with the analysis of narrative (see, for example, Nikolajeva 2004), discourse in general, and the cultural structures reflected in texts (notably those affected by colonialism and post-colonialism, see McGillis 2000).

‘Structuralism’, for example, although perhaps somewhat outmoded as a critical fashion, may well provide a starting point for the study of myth, legend, folk- and fairy-tales – but only a starting point. It is a sociological and historical oddity that children’s literature (perceived to be innocent) has come to include and absorb these (initially) crude, violent, and sexually-charged texts, but by understanding their structures, and then relating them to broader cultural movements, as well as to historical moments, they may be seen as other than they are generally supposed to be. The idea that folk-tales and myths contain archetypal patterns, for example, may be valuable; the idea that these archetypes are appropriate to childhood because of their ‘simple’ form leads us back to debates about perception, understanding, acculturalisation, and concepts of childhood. Jack Zipes’s *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1993) is an excellent example of the way in which structural analyses can be combined with psychological, sociological, and historical studies. ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ may seem to the casual observer to be merely a simple children’s story. Zipes rejects such a view:

> It is impossible to exaggerate the impact and importance of the Little Red Riding Hood syndrome as a dominant cultural pattern in Western societies. [One reading is that] Little Red Riding Hood reflects men’s fear of women’s sexuality – and of their own as well. The curbing and regulation of sexual drives is fully portrayed in this bourgeois literary fairy tale of the basis of deprived male needs. [Alternatively,] given the conditions of Western society where women have been prey for men, there is a positive feature to the tale: its warning about the possibility of sexual molestation continues to serve a useful purpose.

*(Zipes 1993: 80–1; see also Zipes 1997, and Griswold 2000)*

**The uses of children’s literature**

When academics are born, a good fairy at the christening promises them that when they grow up they will be able to read and understand books. Hardly has she finished
speaking, however, when a bad fairy interrupts to say, with a threatening gesture, ‘but you must never, never look out of the window’.

(Joan Rockwell, quoted in Parker 1994: 194)

As we have seen, the study of children’s literature brings us back to some very fundamental concerns: why are we reading? what are books for? The answers may be, as in the case of Chambers, a general liberal-humanist faith in the book and in human civilisation; but very often, children’s literature is seen as the last repository of the *dulcis et utile* philosophy: the books may be pleasant, yes, but essentially they have to be *useful*. Children’s books are of the world, and one of the features of critical theory which has made it unattractive to many children’s book practitioners has been its solipsistic turn.

In the judgement of children’s books, then, *for* is often the key word. Books are not just ‘good’, but ‘good *for*’. Children’s books are used for different purposes at different times – for more things than most books are. Some are ‘good’ time-fillers; others ‘good’ for acquiring literacy; others ‘good’ for expanding the imagination or ‘good’ for inculcating general (or specific) social attitudes, or ‘good’ for dealing with issues or coping with problems, or ‘good’ for reading in that ‘literary’ way which is a small part of adult culture, or ‘good’ for dealing with racism … and most books do several of these things. This is not a scale where some purposes stand higher than others; it is a matrix where hundreds of subtle meanings are generated. What you think is good depends on you, the children, and on what you’re using the book for – and every reading is different.

The two chapters of this book which address practical outcomes of reading children’s books, ‘Understanding reading and literacy’ (Chapter 11) and ‘Healing texts: bibliotherapy and psychology’ (Chapter 13), demonstrate how theory and practice, psychological probability and practical outcome, and awareness of words, people, and their environments, are all inextricably linked. But the same could be said of other ‘practical’ applications of children’s literature, notably the mediation of story to children with special needs (Mathias 2004).

It is the awareness that the study of children’s literature encompasses not only subtle textual distinctions but practical, life-affecting actions which holds the ‘subject’ of children’s literature together. The phenomenal range of prizes for ‘the best’ children’s books awarded each year covers books which are not just abstractly ‘the best’, but which portray minorities, or promote peace – or which are chosen by children (Allen 2004).

Thus, while writers, publishers, librarians, teachers, parents, and children, and very many others, discuss the applications of children’s literature, they are talking about the same interactive area as those who look into the books themselves. This seems to me to be the source, potentially, of immense strength and of immense innovation. In 1997, an issue of the prestigious annual journal, *Children’s Literature*, was devoted to ‘cross-writing’, based on the idea that ‘a dialogic mix of older and younger voices occurs in texts too often read as univocal. Authors who write for children inevitably create a colloquy between past and present selves’. This, the editors concluded, involves ‘interplay and cross-fertilisation’ (Knoepflmacher and Myers 1997: vii). That image could stand for much of Children’s Literature Studies, and it is an understanding of the meanings behind those many voices that this book addresses.

**The future of Children’s Literature Studies**

We are living in a period of unprecedented production and sales of children’s books, which in turn has generated an unprecedented level of general interest in the field. There
has been a steady consolidation of ‘children’s literature’ as an accepted subject in universities across the world, and it seems likely that (despite widespread economic pressures on education systems) this will continue. However, this development has come at a time when there has also been a steady erosion of the established divisions between academic subjects, both in the humanities and the sciences, and in some ways the interdisciplinary nature of children’s literature provides a model for this process.

It may seem that the competing elements will pull the subject apart, rather than give it any coherence. As McGillis has pointed out:

... lots of people in lots of places talk about and even study something called children’s literature, but more often than not these various groups do not speak to each other. The rarefied theorising of the literary academic strikes the practising teacher as arid beyond tolerance, whereas the practical aims of the educationalist seem too limited and limiting to the theorist and historian of children’s literature. The interest in bibliotherapy, sometimes expressed by the psychologically oriented critic ... is often dismissed as lacking the formalist rigor of serious literary analysis. And the interest in accumulating data, the purview of the librarian/media specialist, some [regard as] interesting but hardly intellectually stimulating or socially engaged.

(McGillis 1999: 203)

But this should not discourage us. In 1981 Harold Rosen described the discipline of ‘English’ as:

... the least subject-like of subjects, the least susceptible to definition by reference to the accumulation of wisdom within a single academic discipline. No single set of informing ideas dominates its heartland. No one can confidently map its frontiers: it colonises and is colonised. When we inspect the practices which cluster together uncomfortably under its banner, they appear so diverse, contradictory, arbitrary and random as to defy analysis and explanation.

(Quoted in Eaglestone 2000: 7)

Children’s Literature Studies has as its core a concern – however distant – with children and the concept of childhood, and a natural way forward may be its association with the rapidly developing meta-discipline of Childhood Studies. Here, children’s literature can be placed in the context of real and theoretical childhoods, and in the context of (adult) literary constructions and portrayals of childhood (see Travisano 2000, and Lesnik-Oberstein 1998). Bereavement can be linked to bibliotherapy, commodification of childhood to literary archetypes. A recent series of books on childhood, published by the British Open University, sums up the field:

The growing field of childhood and youth studies provides an integrative framework for interdisciplinary research and teaching, as well as analysis of contemporary policy and practice in, for instance, education, health and social work. Childhood is now a global issue, forcing a reconsideration of conventional approaches to study. Childhood is also a very personal issue for each and every one of us – scholars, policy-makers, parents and children.

(Kehily and Swann 2003: ii)
Diversity, then, is basic to children’s literature. Thus the Fall 2004 edition of the *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* (29.3) contains a close literary analysis of the work of Noel Streatfeild, beside an examination of lesbian dolls and the place of the dog in child literature and sexuality. The *International Companion Encyclopedia*, from which the essays in this volume are taken, ranges from critical theory to publishing for special needs, and from ‘texts’ written in 4500 BC to postmodern metafiction. It is this diversity of concerns, expressed through a diversity of voices, that makes the study of children’s literature so complex and fascinating.

References


Introduction


