

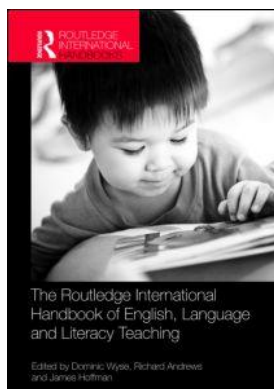
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3

Literature for children

Eve Bearne and Morag Styles

For the purposes of this chapter the authors consider literature for children as texts written to entertain the young. The most rewarding literature does much more, of course – it informs, inspires, nourishes and pleases. We have been asked to concentrate on literature for young children, so we have focused on consideration of international fiction, poetry and picture books in a range of genres and varieties of multimodal texts, including screen-based reading provided by the digital technology revolution, with its attendant ‘democratisation of online spaces’ and new ‘rules of social engagement’ (Lang, 2009), using novel and interactive technologies. For reasons of space, we have excluded such categories as biography and information books for children, and make only passing reference to film and so-called crossover texts. We have been influenced by the views of Barbara Hardy and others that narrative is a primary act of mind (1974) and that good stories offer young readers intellectual and emotional wisdom as well as nourishment for the imagination. Shirley Brice Heath (2004, 2009) also reminds us of the links between the visual, verbal and dramatic, arguing that verbal fluency goes hand-in-hand with attention to visual focus and dramatic role-play which, in turn, enables children to explore being inside someone else’s character in thought, voice and action.

Most contemporary young critical readers cope admirably with this array of varied and demanding texts; indeed they relish the challenge. Victor Watson describes the kind of readers most children are today as sophisticated and multilayered (1993), while Hollindale (1997) argues for a ‘childist criticism’ of children’s books that values young readers’ opinions and preferences and also reflects on the context in which the act of reading takes place. Unfortunately, current classroom practice in literature and reading in western countries is not equally stimulating and well-conceived. This is because in the opening decade of the twenty-first century the provision of literature and reading pedagogy, with some notable exceptions, is dominated by conservative and mechanistic policy initiatives by successive governments of both right and left persuasions, focusing on initial reading skills rather than equipping children to be enthusiastic, discriminating readers of literature for life. In simple terms, this utilitarian direction in the teaching of English has meant that money that used to be spent on children’s books is now often earmarked for textbooks and practical aids to phonics, grammar and the like, a fact only

too plain to children's publishers, who have noticed a marked decline in sales of fiction, poetry and picture books.

Theorising children's literature

Children's literature is not only very difficult to define but remains a site of argument among scholars in the field. In the 1950s and 1960s in England, the emphasis was on defining *literature* for children, attempting to move away from the dominance of Blyton and acknowledging such writers as Garner, Mayne, Pearce and later Mark, whose literary qualities could be demonstrated according to the critical literary criteria used to analyse adult fiction. The term 'children's literature' was then applied retrospectively to earlier writers whose merit might equally be shown by literary criticism – Carroll, Nesbit and Hodgson Burnett, for example (Watson, 2000). While this move gave welcome status to children's writers and contributed to the current rich field of study of what children read, it is incomplete. First, it is clear that many of the texts that children choose and enjoy come from popular fiction. Second, with developments in technology, many of the texts that give children pleasure are not found in books but in visual media, particularly films and DVDs. Similar debates are now held about the quality of screen-based and visual texts as those that argued for 'quality' texts for children in the mid-twentieth century (Buckingham, 2003).

Equally problematic has been the matter of defining 'children'. Drawing on Ariès's (1973) position that childhood is a social construct, Jack Zipes claims that 'there is no such thing as children's literature' (2001: 40). He argues that adults may think that they know what it is, but children often think differently. He focuses particularly on the institutions of authorship, production and marketing dominated by adults and which surround the field of texts for children. Not only is there a need to consider the young reader; children's literature often assumes that children will be central characters in texts that young readers enjoy. These representations are themselves constructs, ranging from depictions of children as innocent and vulnerable, to those which see children as feral, or in distinct contrast, as a force for good (Mills and Mills, 2000; Thacker and Webb, 2002). One of the most coherent approaches of critical theory about children's literature was Hollindale's concept of 'childness' (Hollindale, 1997) which proposed a convincing relationship between childhood, adulthood and narrative. Nodelman sees different theoretical approaches to children's literature as presenting a 'dynamic and interactive pluralism' (Nodelman, 2005: 1); nevertheless, the area remains contested, often awash with assumptions about both literature and childhood.

The field of critical writing about children's literature and its theorisation (often linked to cultural studies and reader response theory) has been well served by academia (for example Tucker, 1981; Rose, 1984; Hunt, 1990, 2004; Stephens and Watson, 1994; Rudd, 2000; Zipes, 2001). The same is true for histories of the subject (Townsend, 1987; Hunt, 1994, 1995; 3, 1994; Hilton *et al.*, 1997; Watson, 2001; Grenby, 2008) and studies of particular authors¹ (for example Tucker and Reynolds, 1997). Then there are many books that provide research, advice and inspiration for teachers and scholars working on texts for children. These include a series of edited volumes by Styles *et al.* (1992,

1 See titles in Continuum's Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature series.

1994, 1996), Anderson and Styles (2000); Bearne and Watson (2000); Gamble and Yates (2002); Reynolds (2005). In addition, many important publications based on classroom-based research aimed at teachers have come out of the Centre for Language in Primary Education and its journal, *Language Matters* (Barrs, 2003).

There is also a plethora of *guides* to the primary texts themselves and their authors, sometimes aimed at parents as well as teachers and scholars, ranging from Goodwin (2008) for 'education professionals', Judith Graham's advice on selecting and analysing texts for the classroom (1997, 2004); Nicholas Tucker's *Rough Guides* to children's books (2002); and James Carter's *Talking Books* (1999). Aidan Chambers, a gifted writer himself, gives excellent advice to teachers in *Booktalk* (1985) and *The Reading Environment* (2001) on using literature with children. Nancy Chambers, through the influential Thimble Press, has consistently provided well-informed books about texts and readers (and produced 100 issues of the highly regarded journal of children's literature, *Signal*). Other international journals which are aimed at academics and, to a lesser extent, teachers, include *Children's Literature in Education* (UK and North America); *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* (UK); *The Lion and the Unicorn* (USA); *Children's Literature* (USA); *Papers* (Australia); *Canadian Children's Literature/Littérature canadienne pour la jeunesse*. *Literacy* (journal of United Kingdom Literacy Association) and *English in Education* (journal of National Association of Teachers of English) often include articles on children's books and reading.

Critical writing about some popular genres of children's literature

There is no large body of empirical research on children's responses to literature, although in recent years scholars have become more interested in how young readers interact with picture books. Margaret Meek's (1988) seminal study showed how challenging picture books taught children some of the complex rules that govern reading narrative, while in the same year Nodelman produced the first serious study of how picture books achieve their effects. This was followed by a variety of publications offering a critical appreciation of the genre, including Jane Doonan's aesthetic approach (1993); Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) semiotic theorisation of multimodality and the grammar of visual design; and Nikolajeva and Scott's framework for analysing the interrelationship between word and image in picture books (2001). This emphasis on the complexity of texts for children has itself marked a shift in critical approaches to children's literature.

Attention to the texts could only provide a partial picture, however. The responses of individual readers to these more challenging texts became a focus for research. Accounts of individual readers that added important knowledge of how children respond to visual texts include Lewis (1992, 2001) and Watson (1996). Arizpe and Styles's (2003) reading pictures research project provided more extensive evidence of children aged four to 11 responding to picture books, as did Pantaleo (2004, 2008). (See also Arizpe and Styles in Flood *et al.* (2008) for a critical review of international research evidence on multimodality and young readers.) Although more concerned with young adult readers, Mackey's (2003) focus on performative aspects of reading brought new understandings to bear, which was also a theme taken up by Bearne, particularly in respect of new technologies and screen-based visual reading (2003a, 2003b). Visual literacy is an increasingly popular subject for higher degree work (see Arizpe *et al.*, 2008;

Noble and Styles, 2009). Critical approaches to children's literature have responded to changing times and changing texts.

While critical approaches have embraced new kinds of texts, traditional tales, myths, legends and fairy tales continue to be central threads in literature for children, in spite of the fact that they were not originally composed for children. These texts arose as part of the community's way of entertaining but instructing at the same time, and this is perhaps why they remain popular as stories for the young. Once such stories were available in written form, whether in popular chapbooks or in collected versions by the Grimm brothers, for example, they became associated with narratives for children (Avery, 1975; Lurie, 1980, 1991; Applebee, 1985). Fairy tales, in particular, have been interpreted according to a range of theoretical perspectives: psychoanalytic theory (Bettelheim, 1976); formalist and structural theory (Propp, 1968); literary scholarship (Lüthi, 1970; Bottigheimer, 1986); feminism (Tatar, 1987; Warner, 1995); and cultural studies (Zipes, 1979, 1999). Often, traditional tales are seen as carrying moral messages, but since there are so many cultural variants of traditional tales, the morality is at best ambiguous. The enduring appeal of traditional tales and their undoubted popularity with young readers means that new versions are constantly appearing in different forms (Warner, 1995; Zipes, 2001), notably in film.

Transformations from one medium to another are not restricted to traditional tales. Previous resistance to what have been termed 'adaptations' (Cartmell and Whelehan, 1999) has largely disappeared as the screen has made a range of texts, including Shakespeare, more available even to very young children; successful picture books such as Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman* have become favourite television viewing. The Disney Corporation has, sometimes controversially, created animated versions of fairy tales and other traditional tales (Barrier, 1999; Wells, 2002; Whitley, 2008); many stories have been retold in captivating and complex graphic novels, with Marcia Williams among the foremost in the UK. Transformations can allow young people access to stories which might otherwise be difficult to read, particularly in the original. The gritty Anglo-Saxon heroic story *Beowulf* has been brought to children through the illustrated version by Charles Keeping (Crossley Holland and Keeping, 1982) as well as the DVD directed by Robert Zemeckis (2008). However, transformations are not always into visual forms; audio CDROMs have opened up possibilities for children to enjoy stories, including Dickens's, which they may find difficult to read. Transformations from book to film and DVD, television, picture book, graphic novel or CDROM should not be seen as replacing the original, but offering a different kind of text, which can be appreciated in its own medium without detracting from a written version.

Recently, we have seen the advent of so-called crossover books, fictional texts whose boundaries between adult and child readers are blurred. The *Harry Potter* series, Pullman's 'His Dark Materials' trilogy and Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* are typical examples. (Indeed, publishers were quick to provide more grown-up covers for adult readers.) Of course, this phenomenon is nothing new – in their day, Carroll's *Alice*, Potter's 'Peter Rabbit' books, Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and a myriad of other texts have been enjoyed by old and young audiences alike.

Gaps and silences

Children's poetry has received very little scholarly attention in the UK and, as far as we can gather, this neglect is universal. Morag Styles produced *From the Garden to*

the Street: Three hundred years of poetry for children in 1998, but this is the exception to the rule. However, poetry for children, the oral tradition and the work of particular poets are included in major guides (see, for example, Watson, 2001; Hunt, 2004) and in general books on children's literature such as Demers and Moyles (1982) and Goldthwaite (1996). Other authors give advice to teachers on ways of using poetry in the classroom (for example Brownjohn, 1994), while poets themselves offer young readers insights into their craft and inspiration in a variety of texts (see Cook and Styles, 1988; Lawson, 2008).

There have been two well-informed Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) reports on poetry teaching in recent years, but the latest suggests that it is less well taught than other aspects of English; indeed, that 'poetry was underdeveloped in many of the schools surveyed' (HMI, 2007: 3). However, more positively, 'pupils enjoyed poetry where teachers used active approaches [...] and the best [of pupils' own poetry] demonstrate[d] a level of sophistication and self expression that is a direct result of effective and engaging teaching' (ibid.).

The relative neglect of children's poetry is regrettable for many reasons, including the fact that young children are responsive to musical language. There are also very fine poets who write for the young. Unfortunately, anxieties about the technicalities of poetry appear to affect teachers from generation to generation, despite some initiatives by arts organisations to dispel this myth (for further information consult, for example Poetry Society, Poetry Book Society, Book Trust UK). A recent research study carried out with over a thousand British teachers (Cremin *et al.*, 2008b) found that very few could name six children's poets and that there was a tendency to focus on the more humorous or 'light hearted' (for example Rosen or Milligan) or a small number whose poetry might be seen as 'classic' (for example Causley, Lear, Stephenson or Milne). Very few women poets or black poets received any mention. OfSTED, the inspection body in the UK, similarly found that poetry teaching is a weaker element of provision in classrooms, even where other aspects of teaching are strong (OfSTED, 2007). Part of the reason may lie in the apparent unwillingness of publishers to promote collections and anthologies in an era of the necessity for best sellers and bottom-line commercial success (Holifield, 2008).

Another area of concern for some time has been the so-called underachievement of boys in literacy and in the past twenty years or so boys' reading has come under scrutiny. Some research has suggested that boys read less than girls, that males read more non-fiction and that girls achieve more highly than boys in national tests of reading (Barrs and Pidgeon, 1993; Hall and Coles, 1999). More recently, however, research into boys' reading (Moss 2000; Moss and McDonald, 2004; Smith, 2004; Warrington and Younger, 2006) suggests the need to acknowledge that some boys do not present problems in their approaches to literacy and that sometimes boys' reading preferences and achievements may not be visible to teachers (Moss, 2007).

Perhaps a more well-founded concern is the lack of international literature available in English for young readers. An initiative to offset this in the UK has been *Reading Differences*, a collaboration between the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (<http://www.qca.org>) and the Centre for Literacy in Education. The annual Marsh Award for the best translated children's book in the UK has gained in interest and status in recent years. Visual texts offer access to international literature, and the quality and range of European picture books are being increasingly recognised; Cotton (2000),

for example offers a comprehensive survey of European children's picture books. Film/DVD is perhaps a more likely means of promoting international narratives and the work of Studio Ghibli, particularly the director Miyazaki, has brought enthralling and enchanting stories, such as 'Princess Mononoke' and 'Howl's Moving Castle' to cinemas and home screens.

Adults in positions of responsibility, of course, have always been exercised about children's reading; it is the instinct of the old to control and, at worst, censor what the young may read and how they may read it. In the classroom, the range of texts to which children are exposed, let alone given opportunities to engage deeply, tends to be limited. There is also a gap between the range of literature provided at school and the texts children are familiar with and of which they become critical readers outside the classroom. Surveys such as Cremin *et al.* (2008a, 2008b) reveal tensions between the personal habits and pleasures of the adult teacher readers, and their knowledge and classroom practice with regard to children's literature. Even when teachers enjoy reading themselves, they do not seem to carry this through to their classroom practice. This may well be constrained by the persistent pressure of accountability, targets and tests in school, which can restrict teachers and pupils' engagement and response.

Putting literature at the heart of the English curriculum

The role of literature is to stimulate the imagination and its affective properties; it is essential for children's emotional as well as intellectual development (Spufford, 2002; Pennac, 2006). The best literature honours children and believes that they deserve to be challenged as well as amused, as the extensive body of critical work by Meek (1988), Hunt (2001), Tucker *et al.* (1981) underlines. How literature achieves its effects can never be neatly calculated; it involves teachers in an act of faith – in the literature itself and in the agency of young learners with 'an instinct to create' (Woolf, 1984: 1). Victor Watson sums it up neatly when he says that 'we bring the whole of ourselves to our reading and the way we read reflects everything that is important about our reading culture' (Watson, 2009).

Recent work about identities and reading suggests that adults' mediation of texts for children has a profound effect on 'how [children] see themselves and who they want to be' (McCarthy and Moje, 2002: 237; see also Silin, 2003). This has implications for classroom practice and pedagogy and for the education of teachers, both in-service and pre-service. Since many books which adults treasure were introduced to them by their teachers, it will be important to extend the scope and range of teachers' knowledge of children's literature (Cremin *et al.*, 2008a). In addition, teachers' knowledge of children's poetry, picture books, fiction and global literature needs considerable development if they are to teach for the 'maximum entitlement' and develop readers for life (Martin, 2003: 14).

Conclusion

Research projects focusing on children's tastes, preferences, reading habits and attitudes (Sarland, 1991; Buckingham, 1993, 2003; Hall and Coles, 1999; Mackey, 2002; Mullis *et al.*,

2003; Twist *et al.*, 2007; Sainsbury and Schagen, 2004; Clark and Foster, 2005; OfSTED, 2007) provide useful evidence on what the young actually do choose to read, dispelling a few myths in the process. However, little research has been carried out on the importance of families in promoting and supporting reading. Studies of screen-based reading in the home (Marsh *et al.*, 2005; Bearne *et al.*, 2007) indicate that there is a wealth of home-based on- and off-screen reading experience that may lie hidden from the view of teachers. Since so many of the texts which children enjoy are first encountered in the home, this must be seen as a significant area for future investigation.

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