

## *My Children Are My Children; Her Books Are My Work*

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• *Adrienne Kertzer* •

In an article "Mad Voices: The Mothers of Welwyn Wilton Katz," that I wrote in 1993, an article that was published two years later by CCL, I argued that powerful maternal voices exist, but that a culture that suspects such voices often contains them by labelling them mad. That article was written a long time ago when I spent a sabbatical researching maternal voices in children's books. Now on another sabbatical, writing on another aspect of children's books, I find reference to the article in an interview that is published in CCL 90.

Although I am sure that if I were to write "Mad Voices" now, there would be things that I would change, I find much in it that I still stand by including my sense that Welwyn Wilton Katz is both an interesting writer whose work merits academic discussion and one who is particularly interested in maternal voices. This conviction is confirmed not only by the quotation that appears in the title of Marianne Micros's interview with Katz, "My Books Are My Children': An Interview with Welwyn Wilton Katz," and the maternal language that figures so remarkably in the interview, but also by the wonderful way Katz states how initially she couldn't finish reading my article, "it seemed so nonsensical" (60). As I said in the article, the best way to dismiss someone's words is to say that she is speaking in the discourse of madness.

In my article I focus on four novels by Katz: *Sun God*, *Moon Witch*, *False Face*, *Whalesinger*, and *Come Like Shadows*. Notwithstanding the aggressive, at times cannibalistic, imagery, e.g., "meat to be torn to pieces and devoured" (57) that appears in the interview every time academic writers are mentioned, I focus on these four novels by Katz, not because I murder to dissect, but, as I say in the article, because Katz is "a particularly interesting example of a contemporary woman novelist, incessantly returning to a subject that is not only problematized by general cultural anxieties about powerful mothers' voices but by the particular expectations we have concerning point of view

in the adolescent novel." My scholarly interest lies in the narrative expectations of different forms of writing; I am not at all interested in "picking apart" a writer, and strongly believe that life is too short to waste my time writing about writers whose work I do not respect. I also do not think that the article's basic premise is proved wrong by the interview, and to critique my argument by discussing mothers who appear in later fiction by Katz is itself not fair, particularly since I conclude that "*Whalesinger* signals a major change in Katz's discourse of madness" and *Come Like Shadows* offers an even "more sympathetic and complex" treatment of maternal figures.

But what really intrigues me in the interview and drives me to write is the opposition between Katz's insistence that her "characters are *individuals*, not *universal types*" (63), and her constant reference to the publication-obsessed academics who tear apart her work, obviously never read for pleasure, and have forgotten the emotions involved in writing fiction. As someone who has never before been regarded as either trendy or politically correct, who was in my article working against the clichés about mothers in the oh-so-trendy Freud and Lacan, I can't help thinking that interviews too can be deconstructed. Marianne Micros identifies herself as a writer who longs for a better way to bring "literature for young readers into fields of academic studies" (57). Under what terms this will happen is unclear given both the interview and the model provided by a review that Micros writes elsewhere in the same issue of *CCL*. According to Katz, the few of us who do take "children's literature ... seriously" (65) have too much power: "the opinions of the very few of them that are critical of my books are given far more weight than they ought to carry" (65). Power? That subject I wrote about? In calling her books her children, and lamenting the power of misguided critics, isn't Katz defending her maternal right to speak, her right to her own maternal power to give birth? (Don't blame me for this metaphor; I'm just reading the interview.) And doesn't she state that those misguided critics have destroyed her willingness to speak? But isn't that conflictual model of speaking (young adult vs. mother, writer vs. critic) the subject of my essay? I'd laugh with delight, only it's hard to, given my "grimly held academic theories" (64).

Micros tells us that such critics have "*lost the pleasure of reading*" (65). The anti-intellectual bias of assuming that the pleasure of the text excludes the analysis of the text is something that Katz does not subscribe to herself when she speaks of her own analysis of children's books. But Micros certainly seems committed to this view, one parallel to the way she opposes the child and adult in her review of Sandra Birdsell's *The Town That Floated Away*. Curiouser and curiouser; in the very same issue that Mavis Reimer talks about how cultures construct "the child," Micros in her review depicts analysis as a temptation that the adult really should resist out of respect for "the child" who hasn't the slightest interest in such analysis. So it seems necessary to say that when I read Katz's books with pleasure because they have ideas worth discussing, I am not subscribing to Micros's model of read-

ing in which the pleasure is somehow separate from and vulnerable to any analysis.

One of the clichés about mothers is that some of us identify too much with our children, and I think that this is painfully evident in the interview. I sincerely regret if Katz views my article as contributing to silencing her work whereas I regard it as participating in a public discussion of a writer whose work I would never describe as nonsense. I do not question Katz's right to her own views, e.g. that "Feminism has no place in my writing" (62), but to move from there to a refusal of a feminist reading of her work is truly a fantasy about a writer's power to control the reading of her books. Just as Katz in her fiction responds to other writers and does not simply reproduce them (i.e. *Come Like Shadows* is a response to, not a reproduction of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), academic scholars respond to writers. That is part of the pleasure of reading and writing.

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