



The Joy of Theory
—Rebecca Rabinowitz

I have to admit, I'm not coming to this conversation neutrally. I love theory. Alongside the people debating whether theory is finished (or too politically narrow, or too removed from fictional texts) is a group of us who find theory invigorating, exciting, and fun. Theory often gets a reputation for being dry or stilted or distant, so it's important to note that some of us find the work downright juicy. See Deborah Kaplan's "Read All Over: Postmodern Resolution in Macaulay's *Black and White*" for an exploration of postmodernism as a source of delight and comfort. Kaplan's essay also fascinatingly blurs the boundaries between adult critic and child reader, showing that the experience of a child reader can be fully as postmodern as that of an adult critic, and fully as joyful.

The reason I love theory is that I find it to be deeply connected to humanity. Being human is so complicated. Books hold extraordinary levels of

complexity within them, and New Criticism is not enough to shine light on all the layers. Critical theories are, at the most basic level, just ways to think about things. Viewpoints. Angles. Think of all the different ways we think about things, all day long in daily life. Anytime you have a misunderstanding with someone because words have more than one meaning, that's deconstruction. But "theory" shouldn't be shorthand for just the postmodern kind. When you notice that one thing and another thing have a two-way influence on each other, that's the same structural dialectic as Marxism. When you think of yourself in any kind of role—mother, father, teacher, rescuer, mischief-maker—that's archetypal theory. Every time you say "I'm the type of man who...", that's archetypal thinking. Of course these examples are simplified; but the ways of thinking used in various kinds of literary criticism are related to ways that we think, ways that we are human. This applies to both adults

and children.

I do a lot of work with queer theory, a descendant of deconstruction focusing on gender and sexuality. Queer theory explores the kaleidoscope of genders and sexualities that exist in children's books—and in real humans. It's flexible and open-ended, and it has an unlimited set of tools—as many as we can think of. This very open-endedness seems to be what worries some people, the people who claim that the most radical action to be taken today is to claim that a word has meaning. But queer theorists and other postmodern critics don't despair of meaning; we see a multiplicity of meanings. This isn't a sort of existential "giving up" of meaning, or a weighting of all meanings equally; rather, it enables literary interpretations with room for nuance, complication, and, sometimes, contradiction. How could we wish to banish nuance?

There seem to be major concerns that theory has been used too narrowly, or too politically, or not politically enough, or in a way too distant from fictional texts. I must admit confusion as to why these worries—even if they are true, which is another question—would be reasons for us to declare ourselves finished with theory, rather than taking theory and using it in the ways we feel have been lacking. Theory throws myriad colours of light on the multi-layered worlds inside children's literature. If some people feel that only a few of those worlds

have been explored—gender and race and sexuality, for example—why not go out and explore other ones? If theoretical writing has drifted too far afield from fiction, bring it back: write more essays brimming and fizzing with examples and quotations. Stick close to the art and form of the fiction. And if the literary theories we have seen so far are themselves too limited, why couldn't we make more?

Let's not subtract—let's shift, and expand, and expound, and add. Perry Nodelman notes that being after theory could mean being "in search of it" (1). We should only be "after theory" in the sense of chasing it with energy—chasing any kind of theory, known or not, that explores children's books and what they mean. The claim that we are, or should be, finished with the application of theory to children's literature is an impossible attempt to forget and deny what we've been doing for decades. If I may quote fiction: "the world [i]s not narrow... but teeming, multiple, intertwining" (James 80), and "when different ideas—different truths—collide, nothing is helped by silence" (Freymann-Weyr 132). The fact that these quotations come from novels shows that even the division between fiction and criticism is more fluid than neat. An attempt to be finished with theory seems like reaching for a silence or simplicity that doesn't match up with our history or with the complexity of children's books or human beings.

Works Cited

- Freyman-Weyr, Garret. *My Heartbeat*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- James, Betsy. *Listening at the Gate*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.
- Kaplan, Deborah. "Read All Over: Postmodern Resolution in Macaulay's Black and White." *ChLA Quarterly* 28 (2003): 37–41.
- Nodelman, Perry. "Editorial: What Are We After? Children's Literature Studies and Literary Theory Now." *CCL/LCJ* 31.1 (2005): 1–19.

Rebecca Rabinowitz has a Master's degree from the Center for the Study of Children's Literature at Simmons College, where she was a Virginia Haviland Scholar. She has published articles on queer theory and children's literature, and on fat characters in contemporary young adult fiction. She is a regular reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews*. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.