

Children's Literature Scholarship in a "Post-theory" Age —Katharine Capshaw Smith



Using his experience in graduate school as a means to discuss the progress of critical inquiry since the 1960s, Perry Nodelman frames the seismic shift in literary studies—from new criticism to postmodernism to “post theory.” I found this moment in Nodelman’s editorial particularly suggestive, and not simply because I was one of those graduate students in the 1990s who addressed obscure figures rather than canonical writers. (My term paper in a course on Romantic Literature, for example, examined the poetry of a servant, Elizabeth Hands, rather than a text by Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, or Coleridge.) But Nodelman’s comparison of his graduate experience with contemporary scholarship also prompted me to think about the ways in which children’s literature *now* is in a different place critically than other fields. I have been teaching graduate-level courses in children’s literature for several years at a variety of institutions. But this fall I taught my first graduate

course at a research-intensive university, and I was quite surprised that most students wanted to write about a single text: *Anne of Green Gables*. We studied a range of books, plays, and poems by writers of various ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds—and yet most of my students wrote about *Anne*. And as much as I adore *Anne of Green Gables*, I was surprised that few students wanted to pursue smart in-class observations about other texts, and even fewer went “off syllabus” to enter into recovery projects on marginalized or ignored authors. I do not want to argue that my class is typical, but rather that this experience uncovered for me the formative role of graduate training in enabling critics in our field to expand their horizons: graduate education is key to expanding the texts critics address and the approaches they take.

But more to the point, my experience prompted me to ask this question: does graduate training in

English translate into more inclusive and capacious visions of children's literature? While Victorian studies may embrace Mary Elizabeth Braddon, as Nodelman notes, I am not confident that children's literature has reached this kind of liberated critical moment. In fact, many scholars share my students' traditionalist tendencies. Is there something about children's literature as a field that guides students and critics towards a canon? Does this conservative predisposition reflect anxiety about our legitimacy as a field? Or does it indicate a desire for a "great books" focus? Or, more practically, do we study the books that stay in print? Or do we tend to engage with an established critical dialogue, and end up studying the books that other critics study? I am not sure. It could be all of these things, or none. And certainly I do not mean to overlook the work of established voices like Dianne Johnson, Violet Harris, Rudine Sims Bishop, Clare Bradford, and Donnarae MacCann (among others) who have been stalwart advocates for marginalized texts, or of young critics like Julia Mickenberg, Nathalie op de Beeck, Michelle Martin, and Kenneth Kidd who value inclusivity and recovery. But overall, in what we teach and what we study, I see the field clinging to a canon of "great texts." When Nodelman talks about the ChLA conference in 2005, he explains, "While I heard ideas and interpretations that interested me . . . , I can't say I was particularly surprised by most of them" (15–16).

I do not disagree with Nodelman about the limited scope of scholarship, but I place the blame (in my darker moods) not on predictable modes of inquiry but on our reluctance to expand the kinds of texts that we study.

It is crucial to examine the reasons for what Nodelman calls the "acceptably sclerotic work" (16) one finds in children's literature scholarship. However, I think the field is positioned exceptionally well to explore some of the possibilities of a "post-theory" age. Lindsay Waters writes in the December 2005 *Chronicle Review* that "Literary criticism no longer aims to appreciate aesthetics—to study how human beings respond to art. . . . Without understanding that intensely physical reaction, scholarship about the arts can no longer enlarge the soul" (B6). What better place to analyze a visceral response to art than in children's literature, a world in which beauty and hate, good and evil, love and sacrifice all take palpable shape? While I disagree with Waters when he pits critical interpretation against aesthetic delight (pleasure is politically positioned too, of course), I do believe that children's literature could be the best place to examine how humans experience art, perhaps starting from (instead of against) what we have learned through a scholarship of political inquiry. On a related note, Nodelman discusses the need to attend to the specifics of literary form: "It is also clear, however, that the kinds of reading

privileged by cultural studies approaches and their focus on matters of race, class and gender have a tendency to bypass the significance of the specific form and language of texts" (13). While I do not agree with this generalization since I know that many cultural studies arguments attend to textual nuance, in general it would seem that children's literature has the best opportunity to define what is literary language. And this opportunity stems not from assumptions that children's texts are easier, or simpler, or more "accessible" (as detractors of the field might believe) by virtue of the young audience. Rather, the presence of that audience places certain formal demands on artists, encouraging an attention to the economy of language. Theories of aesthetics in poetry could be applied to children's literature of all genres, opening up the possibilities not only for understanding the nature of literary language but for expanding cross-generic theory.

Another possibility emerging from "post-theory" discussions is critical interdisciplinarity. As scholars become less embedded in a single theoretical perspective, their intellectual flexibility can engender truly pioneering critical work. As Vincent B. Leitch argues in *Profession* (2005), "theory is widely considered a toolbox of flexible, useful, and contingent devices, judged for their productivity and innovation" (123). Children's literature scholars are expert at theoretical interdisciplinarity in the

classroom; perhaps more than any other field in English studies, children's literature has been the site where critical approaches converge. We are best suited to transforming classroom innovations into interdisciplinary theoretical scholarship.

One of the main critiques of literary theory thus far is that it has moved away from its radical roots in Marxism, a phenomenon Nodelman lucidly details. Simon Jarvis in the *Times Literary Supplement* assents that "literary politics is more often a surrogate for politics than a real contribution to political justice." I have faith that children's literature scholarship can make a real difference for social change. We are more connected to the idea that actual readers are affected by books than are scholars in other fields; and while I'm not one to think that children are necessarily more malleable ideologically than adults, I do believe that books can transform a reader, any reader. And we have an opportunity in the fact that the audience for the books we study often participate in institutional settings which encourage them to read. (We cannot say the same about adult audiences.) In many cultures, children have contact with books. I have faith in the tangible political effects of what we study because I believe that books can transform. But first we have to be transformed as a field, and think more critically about the kinds of texts we study and the perspectives we introduce in college classrooms to future teachers. This is not to

say that all books we study and teach can or should be “politically correct,” or even that all of them should be offered to actual child readers; my point is that our scholarship and our college classrooms can bring the political implications of texts to the surface. Our student teachers can then enable child readers to think critically about what they read, to consider why (politically) books prompt joy, derision, or indifference. For me, this is the ultimate reward of writing and teaching in the field of children’s literature: through our work with future teachers, we can get children to think about the politics of texts, and as a result to consider their own positions within social and economic structures.

“Post-theory” will come to fruition in journals of children’s literature criticism. Our journals have a long-standing tradition of inclusivity in critical approaches, and I am certain that they will continue to encourage scholarship informed by interdisciplinarity, aesthetic theory, and social justice. The fact of the matter is that journal publication plays a major role in the academic success of young scholars, as well as in

creating a “new guard” of literary theorists. In a time of intense job market pressures, as well as rigorous reappointment, pre-tenure and tenure reviews, departmental committees turn to journal publication as a central measure of success (especially since most departmental committees are comprised of scholars outside our field, and therefore use journal publication to verify quality). By encouraging innovative scholarship, our journals can transform our field and the face of literary scholarship in general. Our field is also in an excellent position in terms of book publication. In contrast to the overall crisis in academic publishing lamented by the MLA, children’s literature in recent years has found multiple venues eager for scholarly monographs: Ashgate, Routledge, Indiana, Minnesota, Iowa, Oxford, and many other presses have published important books in the field, and several have dedicated lines to children’s literature studies. Academic publishers envision children’s literature as a vital site of “post-theory” interdisciplinarity and critical innovation. I hope that we can keep the faith in our own possibilities.

Works Cited

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