



Children's Literature in Progress

—Evelyn Arizpe

In his “essai,” Sebastien Chapleau identifies two different contexts of hierarchization: first, the place of “children’s literature” studies in the university, and second, the place of the child/childhood within children’s literature studies as represented by texts written by children—the potentially rightful title-holders of the term “children’s literature.” My response is written in the same spirit as his “essai” and aims to contribute some ideas on the second context (given that I wholeheartedly agree with Chapleau’s discussion of the first).

It is indisputable that the term “children’s literature” raises a host of issues about values, ownership, and authorship: is it literature that is considered “good” for children? Is it literature that is appropriated by children? Is it literature that is written with children in mind? These are only a few of the questions that, as Chapleau reminds us, have been pondered at length by Jacqueline Rose,

Peter Hunt, Kimberley Reynolds, Perry Nodelman, and others. My own experience in dealing with the term and some of these issues began many years ago, before I had read any of these distinguished critics’ work (unknown and unavailable in Mexico at the time), during the writing of my B.A. thesis on “Mexican children’s literature.” Even then, in the mid-1980s, I struggled with the terms *literatura infantil* and *literatura para niños* that did not feel “right” and ended up with the awkward and rather vague title of “Mexican Stories by Older Ones for Younger Ones: An Analysis of Language and Content” [*Cuentos mexicanos de grandes para chicos: un análisis de su lenguaje y contenido*]. I am now reminded of the words of Antonio Robles, one of the most prolific writers in that country in mid-century, which I quoted in this thesis and which clearly reflect one line of understanding of “children’s literature” adopted by many authors

throughout history: “one shouldn’t look for what children like, but make sure that children like what they should” (Robles 33). Among the moral and aesthetic implications that this statement has for both writers and critics is the silencing of the voice of childhood, based on an assumption that children have nothing valuable to say.

This takes us back to Chapleau’s essay and the idea of understanding “children’s literature” to be that which is produced *by* children. Even if we adopt a broad definition of “literature” and include children’s writing, it is impossible to disentangle the voices of the children (which Chapleau is urging us to hear) from the voices of the writers for children. It is these adult writers who encourage and “teach” children to write texts that eventually become less ephemeral, more memorable, and re-readable by themselves and others. In the words of Myra Barrs, who has carried out seminal research on children’s writing, “The work of skilful and experienced children’s authors, who know how to make worlds and engage readers, is one of the main resources we have for showing children what words can do” (267). Her findings clearly show how the reading of two particular works of children’s literature (*The Green Children* by Kevin Crossley Holland and *Fire, Bed and Bone* by Henrietta Branford) had an impact on the writing development of primary-school children, making

their texts more powerful, affective, and poetic, and even influencing the lengths of their sentences.

My own experience of writing by children comes from several sources: my daughters’ writing (as I write this, they are eight and ten years old); the observations of other parents who kept records of their children’s responses to books and other developments in literacy (Hugh and Maureen Crago, Shelby Wolf, Glenda Bissex, and Virginia Lowe, among others); research on children’s writing in general; and, finally, the responses of children to various genres of literature during research projects in Mexico and the United Kingdom, where one project included immigrant children from all over the world. During these research projects, as an adult and researcher, I was particularly anxious to provide a space for the children and teenagers’ voices and to “hear” what they had to say. Even if their responses were not so much about their own writing as about others’ writing *for* them, I believe that their words, together with the evidence from my other sources, can add to Chapleau’s argument for considering children’s writing as a source for literary criticism.

Children’s reasons for writing are probably as varied as those of adult authors. They stem from a desire to be famous, to please others (parents, teachers), to entertain (mainly their peers or siblings), or simply to please themselves (“it’s fun”).

The first two reasons usually either end in failure or result in a more conventional, predictable type of text that may go through several drafts, usually with some adult input. The other two motivations result in freer, more unexpected texts (“incontrôlables et imprévisibles,” as Chapleau describes them [119]) that are based on humour, language, or imaginative play. Think of the undeniably poetic text uttered by two-and-a-half-year-old Lem, growing up in the black working-class community of Trackton, captured by Shirley B. Heath in her famous study, *Ways with Words*:

Way
Far
Now
It a church bell
Ringin’
Dey singing’
 Ringin’
You hear it?
I hear it
Far
Now (170)

Lem was experimenting with sound, rhythm, and pattern, probably enjoying the way the sounds felt on his tongue and sounded in his ears. This text is also, however, a reflection of Lem’s socio-

cultural context. Heath explains that this sort of “story-poem” was characteristic of preschoolers in this community, and describes how it reflects the features of the narrative texts he hears around him and contrasts with the story formulas used by children in other social groups (i.e. “Once upon a time,” “The end”).

My daughters tend to write mainly as a game or within a game, to make themselves and each other laugh by playing with sounds or ideas. It is usually a spontaneous activity, brought on by the game they are playing—no one urges them to do it. The results are often multimodal texts, with pictures included either manually or electronically. Yet, with or without the technology, just like Lem’s, their texts are inextricably embedded in their home context—in this case, white, middle-class, and academic. I make no excuses for including two examples of their writing because I think these illustrate the point very well. Although they did not use this term, the first one is a dirge, written after the death of Chubba, one of the many imaginary characters that figure at times in my daughters’ play, and it was sung repeatedly during his “funeral” (the text is reproduced with their permission and exactly as they wrote it in 2007):

In 1967 the famouse chubba Mcnonoo
Theird of the theird of the first

was born and in 2003 chubba died
Of over eating. Chubba to those of whom loved
him
And others to whom he was special will
Remember him and all the good things he did.
Chubba Mcfluffy, chubba's best friend said that
He deserved a gold cup for being the best
friend
And the best over eater any one could ever
have.

He will be remeberd,
For ever more song

Chubba is as good as gold
Chubba is as good as gold

CHORUS

Chubba is the greatist friend
Chubba is the greatist friend

CHORUS

Chubba's best at eating food BUT He
will be remeberd for ever more
Chubba's best at eating food

CHORUS

Chubba is now dead

Chubba is now dead

LAST CHORUS

LOUD

This text was intended for no other audience than themselves and a group of Chubba's imaginary friends. It was typed on the computer, printed, and sung. There was evident enjoyment in the "sad" performance of the dirge, as well as in the sounds of the words, the alliteration, repetitions, and changes in volume (soft, then loud at the end). Once in a while, Chubba and his dirge are remembered, but the initial enthusiasm has passed and there has not been a repeat of this, or another, "funeral." As is the case with most of their writing, it is not a text that they go back to: it was meant to be ephemeral, written for the moment, and only one part of the whole play event/performance. Perhaps it is also worth mentioning that that this piece was written during a period when healthy eating, school dinners, and obesity figured prominently in the national news, in school, and in conversations at home. We had also recently moved to Scotland, hence, perhaps, Chubba's surname sounding like that of a Scottish "laird."

The next example is another collaborative effort, written in 2005 (aged five and eight), shortly

The End

Once upon a time Flora said
 oh no the end. Sorry! mmm
 ok Flora said ... the end. right
 lets see Flora said ok I'm going bye!
 oh no your not come back! to late
 oh... well lets see lets start agin

bye
 ↓

Figure 1.

after reading Allan Ahlberg's metafictional picture book, *The Bravest Ever Bear* (1999), in which various fairy-tale characters become annoyed with the way the narrative is going and try to write their own stories (see Figures 1 and 2). At the time, I was interested in metafictional picture books and

had a pile of them around the house. During the writing, there was a great deal of giggling as well as a constant re-reading, "doing the voices," and improvisation, some of which made it into the final product, some of which was discarded. This text confirms Myra Barrs's findings on the

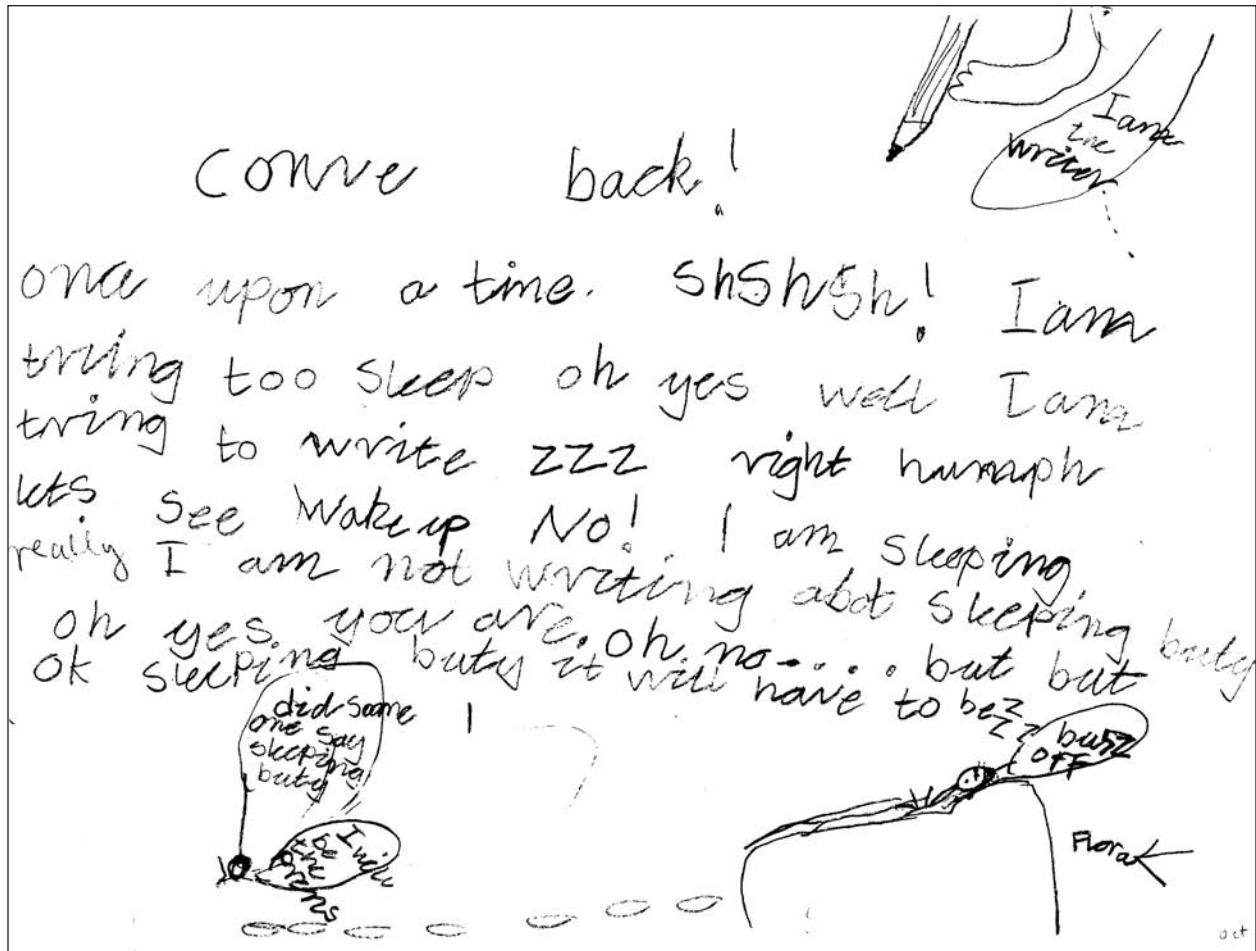


Figure 2.

impact of reading and shows how children often borrow from the authors they read. Although all writers borrow from others, it is an issue that

must be considered when discussing texts by children. Often, it is only a parent or a teacher working closely with the child who will detect the

influences and intertextual references, but they will be there, and questions have to be asked about what this means when taking children's writing seriously.

This example again highlights the implications that culture and literacy have for children's productions. Factors such as the availability of books, the modelling and expectations about writing at home, and expectations about gender and literacy are evident in the case studies where other parents in similar households to ours observed and recorded their children's reading and/or writing developments. Although the majority of these studies concentrate on reading and not on writing, the instances of textual production that are mentioned are evidently related to that particular context. As Virginia Lowe writes of her children's productions, "Because they heard so many books, the stories the children created themselves were recognisably literary" (111). Shelby A. Wolf and Shirley B. Heath provide similar examples and trace the ways in which Ashley and Lindsey "borrow" from books, films, and other media to create their own texts.

Yet children do not simply absorb and regurgitate. Glenda L. Bissex's case study of her son is the most complete in terms of the development of writing. She shows how, by the age of eight, when he is no longer held back by

spelling or handwriting, Paul becomes

[. . .] a storyteller with skilful control of his material, a sense of humour, and awareness of his audience [. . .] his development in writing also reflects his greater knowledge of the world, his decentring (expressed both in his absorption of things outside himself and in his ability to consider other points of view), and the growth of his imagination (as distinct from childish "distortions" of "reality") and reasoning. (106)

She adds that his wide reading has also contributed to this development, but points out that he acts upon it selectively, responding to some influences and experiences but not others: "although he was not in control of his environment, he acted on it" (212). This type of study is certainly one way in which we can learn from and about childhood, in terms of how the writing process evolves and how it takes in and at the same time transforms other texts, providing an understanding of the very foundations of literary theory and criticism: language, the self, and society.

Other research, such as that carried out by Myra Barrs (not carried out in the researcher's own home but in other people's homes or in schools) has looked at how a generally rich diet of stories or particular books influence children's storytelling

and writing. Carole Fox shows how children base their stories on the language and rhythms of other stories and books. She points out that children who don't grow up with extensive experience of stories, whether oral or textual, will be just as likely to bring the narrative structures from TV and other media into their narratives. Kate Pahl's research on ephemera and popular culture in the home reveals just how true this is, and literary critics would do well to consider children's responses to, and own productions of, popular-culture texts in order to obtain a different perspective on how narratives work.

What most children's words and texts reveal are the initial stages in the development of literary writing or, perhaps, "children's literature in progress." In these first stages, the play and fun that goes into the writing are mainly for the writer's benefit. If the finished product is to sustain another reader's interest (or the writer's interest beyond the moment), however, it more than likely will need some adult input. This co-operation raises another series of questions: How does co-writing affect the text? Is it still "children's literature"? What about recent children's books, such as *Lionboy* by "Zizou Corder" (the pseudonym adopted by adult novelist Louisa Young and her teenage daughter Isabel Adomakoh Young), that are written by adults and children together?

Finally, what do we learn when we hear children talking about texts or what Chapleau calls "childist criticism" (*la critique "enfantiste"*)? Most research in this field has been carried out within educational contexts and frameworks, and it is too broad to attempt to summarize here, given that it ranges from children discussing their own and their peers' texts to talking and writing about poetry, narrative, and picture books. It also includes research based on "the child's eye view" (see the research on response to multimodal texts that Morag Styles and I recently reviewed in "A Critical Review"). Both literary critics and art critics could learn from these studies.

To give just one example from my own research, I have found that, with the exception of those brought up in "bookish" households, many children and even young teenagers (from Mexico, the UK, and other countries) have a very vague concept of "the author." They are puzzled over what could motivate a person to write, and at the same time overwhelmed by admiration and by the authority of the printed word. This means that they do not easily see themselves as writers and they find it difficult to imagine that they could ever see their own words in print.

Unless this vagueness and awe before the printed word are addressed, it is hard for children to take ownership of words and to write "for"

others, creating worlds and engaging readers like the best writers for children do. This perceived gap between readers and authors is also an obstacle for any meaningful “childist criticism.” As we found in our research on children’s responses to picture books, however, it does not take much more than space, time, and a few “verbal tools” to obtain deep and perceptive insights from even very young children (Arizpe and Styles, *Children Reading Pictures*). It may be that they feel more comfortable reading texts of the sort of length that they could write and talking about pictures, which are still one of their main forms of expression. In this case, their familiarity with digital texts and new technologies may better equip and enable them to bridge the gap between those who “publish” and those who don’t.

Both within and without school, children and teenagers are beginning to take advantage of the possibilities that e-publishing offers. Individuals and groups can set up their own webpages or blogs, and some established websites invite submissions that include use of image, design, and other media. This has implications not only for promoting children’s writing, but also for overcoming the obstacle of access to writing by children. With the exception of teachers, it is rare

that adults have access to a wide range of texts written by children. Nine-year-old Daisy Ashford’s *The Young Visitors*, published in 1919, remains one of the few children’s works that have made it into print, and is a reminder of how rich and valuable an archive of similar texts would be.¹

There is definitely a place for children’s voices and texts in the “higher” realms of literary academia, and these texts have the potential to tell us much about childhood and contemporary children. Until this is recognized, however, there will continue to be immense chasms between literary critics and children, as well as between many children and published texts, despite the influences these texts often have on children’s writing at home and at school. Some will argue that the unavoidable lack of knowledge and experience make “childist” literature and “childist criticism” an impossibility. Yet if, as Chappleau suggests, we tune our ears to what is occurring within children’s worlds of knowledge and experience, we will not only learn from them but also be able to provide children with some of the tools and encouragement they need to produce texts which can satisfy them, provoke a reaction in others, and move us to laughter or tears and a desire to keep on reading.

Notes

¹ Although Juvenilia Press publishes work written by children and adolescents from the 18th to the 20th centuries, it is all by

authors who became famous later in life.

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