The Precarious Life of Children's Literature Criticism

—Perry Nodelman

In a short but intense book called *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler has some important things to say about the international political climate in the years after 9/11, especially about the implications of the American government's declaration of an apparently endless war against terrorism for our understanding of ourselves and others as human beings. As I read it, however, I found myself thinking, not just about the prisoners indefinitely detained at Guantanamo Bay or about the ethical significance of justifications for violence, but also about something else—something I often find myself thinking about: children's literature criticism. Call me obsessed, I guess. Still, the connections between a world shaped by terror and a kind of literature shaped by adult fears for children are not really all that tenuous, and while the professional practices of critics like me seem insignificant in comparison to the world-shaking decisions of generals and presidents, they might well throw light on each other. How we human beings do international relations and how we do criticism both imply and represent what we find acceptable in all our relationships with each other.

I began to think about children's literature criticism in terms of *Precarious Life* as Butler discussed "the problem of a primary vulnerability to others, one that one cannot will away without ceasing to be human" (xiv). For her, "Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (20). It is this precariousness that Butler understands the American government's acts of ongoing war and indefinite detention as attempting to ignore: denying the possibility of other ways of thinking about the world, denying human rights in ways

that deny the humanity of one's enemies—these acts cut us off from our own humanity. As Butler writes, "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something." (23).

As I read these sentences, I found myself, egocentrically, thinking of another sentence in another text, a sentence about, among others, myself: "For [John] Stephens, Nodelman, and even for [Roderick] McGillis, there has to be some way out of discourse, some way of touching the 'real'; and this, curiously, is the rationalization for the teaching and practice of reading" (Walsh, "Child/Animal" 162). This sentence appears in "Child/Animal: It's the 'Real' Thing," an article by Sue Walsh in *The Yearbook of English Studies*. Walsh is one of a number of children's literature critics associated with the Centre for International Research in Childhood: Literature, Culture, Media at the University of Reading, and another piece by her appears in *Children's Literature: New Approaches*, a collection of essays by the Reading group, edited by Karín Lesnik-Oberstein. The essays in this volume share a central concern with showing that, as Lesnik-Oberstein argues, the one "aim or goal" of children's literature criticism—"the choosing of good books for children—does not change from critic to critic, no matter how much they claim that they will be doing things differently, or applying new approaches or methodologies"(4). This goal is achieved, she says, by "each critic endlessly re-finding finally, through whatever route, a child who can be known, and to whom their good can then be done." (20). In order to make that point, the critics represented in the volume carefully tease out places in the work of other children's literature critics where, while making use of theories of discourse that seem to deny the existence of a knowable world beyond and outside of language, they nevertheless "re-find" a child to whom good can be done.

In her essay in the same volume, Walsh objects to "a notion of language as reflecting the world rather than constitutive of it" (43). Views that language is constitutive of the world are versions of Derrida's famous claim that "[t]here is nothing outside of the text; . . . *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" (*Of Grammatology* 158) because the world outside the text—the world with real children in it—has "always already escaped . . . , never existed . . . ; what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence" (159). So the goal of the Reading critics is to show how children's literature critics like Stephens, McGillis, and me, despite our use of views of discourse as constitutive of language, always end up suggesting there is a world outside the text, and that literature can and does reach real children in it. In doing so, I, Stephens, McGillis, Peter Hunt, David Rudd,

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and others undermine our own positions and are therefore dismissible.

In an essay that appeared earlier in *CCL/LCJ*, Peter Hunt had some interesting things to say about *Children's Literature: New Approaches*, among them this: "This book reminds me of why I retired from academia, because it belongs to the thriving school of academic writing that sets out not so much to say something new and stimulating, as to demolish previous critics in the field and to prove how superior the present writers are, not only to the past critics but to the authors of the fictions ostensibly being written about. It is not, to my mind, an attractive form" (131). I can't say I find it very attractive either. The woefully gleeful enthusiasm with which the Reading critics single-mindedly ferret out divergences from their one right way of thinking makes their interactions with other critics less like dialogues than attempted massacres, uncomfortably reminiscent of Butler's description of the Bush view of international relations: "Either you're with us or you're with the terrorists" (2). But then, like Hunt, I'm a victim here—identified as something like a terrorist against reason and the well-being of children. I've been told my work is suspect and seriously flawed. I am hurt, and find myself wanting to complain about it.

But as I acknowledge that desire, I am reminded of Butler's comment that "we're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something." (23). I've been undone, shown to be vulnerable by this other version of my work—and if I don't consider that version seriously by trying to enter into dialogue with it rather than just turning around and accusing it of the terrorism it accuses me of, I might well miss something of importance. So I'd like to take a closer look at what the Reading critics are doing, and then consider what their disagreements with the critics they discuss might mean about the ethics of children's literature criticism generally, and about the ethics of the criticism that appears in *CCL/LCJ* specifically. I do so on the assumption that *CCL/LCJ* readers will find

it even more obvious than usual that any opinions I express here are my own, and are not intended to represent *CCL/LCJ*'s editorial policy any more than the degree to which I am personally able to decide it—which, in the light of the stimulating atmosphere of ongoing discussion in which the editorial board operates, is a matter of ongoing and, to my mind, very healthy negotiation. We are constantly, I am glad to say, undone by each other, in wonderfully productive ways.

In her introduction to *Children's Literature: New Approaches*, Lesnik-Oberstein has this to say about David Rudd's discussion of ideology in his book on Enid Blyton:

> In writing that children should not be seen "as simply mouthing 'adult' discourses," Rudd must be assuming that they also somehow articulate other-than-adult, or child, discourses. Moreover, "mouthing" seems to imply, if not assert overtly, that children only imitate or "pass on" adult discourses about them, rather than this being an "own," innate or spontaneous discursivity. (14)

Rudd, in other words, assumes a real child outside the text even in the very act of discussing how texts impose themselves on children.

Or does he? In order to reach this conclusion, Lesnik-Oberstein needs to ignore the statement she quotes from Rudd a little earlier that "each person is obviously a different weave of constituent discursive threads" (Rudd, *Enid Blyton* 11-12, qtd. in Lesnik-Oberstein, "Children's Literature" 14). As such a weave, a child with a range of experience beyond just reading texts might well have the choice of articulating discourses different from the "adult" ones the texts assume—especially considering the existence of a range of discourses—nursery rhymes and skipping songs, day-care and playground interactions, "typical" childlike behaviour—that we, children and adults, culturally identify as childlike. A child might well have an existence beyond and outside a specific text or kind of texts—beyond something like the discourse of children's literature criticism—even if there is nothing outside the text. In her unwillingness to acknowledge both the complex weaves that form individual subjectivities and the complex and often conflicting range of discourses and ideologies available to each of us as we go about living our lives, Lesnik-Oberstein assumes an either-or situation much less complex and, for me, much less convincingly like actual experience than the one Rudd, in fact, describes.

Something similar happens in the way the Reading critics discuss my work. In her introduction, Lesnik-Oberstein argues that "Nodelman's

formulations . . . deploy simultaneously two ideas about childhood as identity, as Rudd's do also: on the one hand there are their overt arguments about the child as a construction, but on the other hand they also refer to a 'real child'" (13). She bases that conclusion on an article I wrote some years ago on deconstruction and fairy tales, in which, after asserting that "there surely never was a childhood, in the sense of something surer and safer and happier than the world we perceive as adults," I go on to say that thinking there is such a childhood means that "more significantly, we belittle childhood and allow ourselves to ignore our actual knowledge of real children" (147). Discussing this same sentence in his article in the Lesnik-Oberstein collection, Neil Cocks agrees with Lesnik-Oberstein: "Nodelman argues for the notion of 'construction' before finally acknowledging the 'real child' and his unquestioned knowledge of it." (116n83). And in her "Child/Animal" essay and again discussing the same sentence—I suppose I should be flattered that there appears to be just this one recurring example of my iniquity to be pounced upon—Sue Walsh expresses the same concern: "Nodelman's essay co-opts the work of deconstruction to a liberal philosophy of education that resurrects the ignorant (innocent of language) child and the adult as the one who knows, and moreover knows what is good for the child, in this case 'deconstruction'" (160).

What I find most interesting about all three of these comments is how they replace the "real children" of my original with a "real child" — replace a group of existing beings with a construct of representative childhood. I've spent much of my life as a children's literature critic arguing that the supposedly "real child" does not exist, but, surely, real children—living young human beings—do. And as adults who interact with the children in our lives, we do have real knowledge of them—knowledge, at least, of our own understanding of those interactions, and, if we are wise enough to pay attention, knowledge of their understandings of those interactions as they are able to communicate them to us. To say that adults have knowledge of the real children they know surely does not inevitably imply any claim to an all-knowing superiority to them or any absolute knowledge of what is essentially childlike.

For Walsh, perhaps, real children don't exist, at least not in any way describable in words, for as the quotation I made from her earlier suggests, she objects to "a notion of language as reflecting the world rather than constitutive of it." ("Author and Authorship" 43). It distresses her, therefore, that for me and for other children's literature critics, "there has to be some way out of discourse, some way of touching the 'real'; and this, curiously, is

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the rationalization for the teaching and practice of reading" (Walsh, "Child/Animal" 162).

There is, certainly, some logic in Walsh's distress, and, despite its dismaying gleefulness, in the Reading critics' critique of other children's literature critics generally. If Derrida is right in saying that there is nothing outside of a text, that can mean one of two things about the reality of children. Either "real" children do not exist beyond and outside of discourse in any way discourse can grasp, or else "real children" are part of discourse also—already inside the text.

As I understand him in my halting, philosophically under-informed way, Derrida himself would have argued for the latter. In an interview in Payne and Schad's *Life.After.Theory*, he says, "[W]hen I said there is 'nothing outside of the text,' I didn't mean 'text' in the sense of what is written in a book. . . . Life after theory is a text. Life is a text, but then we have to change the rules, change the concept of text, and that is what I try to do" (27). From this point of view, the "real children" I identified as being outside the texts of children's literature are nevertheless still inside the text that consists of living with other people, using language, being in discourse. As I suggested earlier in relation to Lesnik-Oberstein's discussion of Rudd, "real children" might be best understood as complex and, in each case, individual interweavings of the varied discourses they've already encountered that are a part of them and that they are a part of. Their experiences of children's literature might best be understood as encounters with further complex networks of discourse that do claim them—do try to take them from a textual position outside the specific corner of textuality one specific text or type of children's book represents and bring them inside it. Such real children do already have actual knowledge—a subjectivity already inside discourse but still capable of being changed by access to other elements of discourse. Even, or

especially, when understood as discourse, real life goes on, real encounters take place, real children are undone—and made—by adult conceptions of childhood, and adult conceptions of childhood are undone—and made—by real children. Contrary to Walsh and her colleagues, the idea that there is no way outside of discourse does not in any way preclude or condemn adult concern with the effects of texts on real readers.

There's something else that I think has to be considered. Despite the (for me) compelling logic of what I've just argued, it's nevertheless important, I think, that we act as if we believe that children do exist outside discourse. Real children, being human, have bodies—bodies that are written on and understood by means of discourse, but that seem to most of us inside of discourse to be really there, physical, corporeal, real enough to be written on but still be something that is more than just that writing. To deny a real beyond discourse is, in effect, to deny the reality of that corporeality—of embodied humanity. As David Rudd writes in his article, "Theorising and Theories," though the world is constructed through discourse, not everything is discursive. The body itself influences how we speak. . . . Moreover, the body, being part of social relations, can itself resist discursive shaping" (32).

Furthermore, discourse makes us aware of (or at least leads us to believe we are aware of) a world of sensations existing outside itself. The sensuous information that contains and conveys abstracted and rationalized cultural knowledge in discourse—the sounds of words and the colours of pictures—remains within the discourse, and continues to convey itself while it is conveying the cultural knowledge. The patch of red in a picture that represents a traffic light or a pair of lips is still, whatever it represents, a sensation, something we can name red because it seems to us there to be named. It has been brought inside the network of discourse, but as itself, as a physical sensation our eyes respond to, it still seems to remain outside. In order to understand what the red represents, the implied viewer has no choice but to see and respond to the physical sensation in and for itself as well as in terms of what it has come to represent. For Julia Kristeva, that represents a path to liberation from the constraint of being constructed as a specific kind of subject placed within specific cultural values: "it is through color—colors—that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic and so forth) that it, as a conscious subject, accepts. . . . The chromatic apparatus, like rhythm in language, thus involves a shattering of meaning and its subject into a scale of differences" (221).

Butler implies something similar about the business of being human when she discusses "the incommensurability of the face with whatever it represents. Strictly speaking . . . , the face does not represent anything, in the sense that it fails to capture and deliver that to which it refers" (144), and for that reason, "the human is not identified with what is represented but neither is it identified with the unrepresentable; it is, rather, that which limits the success of any representational practice" (144)—that which we have to assume exists intriguingly beyond the discourse that purports to represent it and that, in the very act of being understood as a representation, implies something outside itself, something unreachable except by means of the representations that replace it in discourse. Paradoxically, the human seems to exist outside of discourse because discourse suggests it does.

Like faces or colours, "real" children—the ones represented in discourse—are, in the very act of being understood as a representation, inevitably presumed to exist outside the representation—perhaps unreachably so in terms of what they mean in discourse, but there nevertheless, as a necessary postulate of their representability. And while we adults cannot come into contact with actual children without having to understand the moments of contact within our systems of discourse, we can nevertheless come into contact with them, be human beings in relation to their human presence. In this sense at least, there is, in Walsh's words, "some way out of discourse, some way of touching the 'real.'"

It seems important to try to do so—to believe, in particular, in the reality of real children or at least in the differences between the spaces they occupy within discourse as children and the ones we occupy as adults; and to take those differences—their being other from ourselves as adults—into account in our work as critics of children's literature.

I hasten to add that I'm not suggesting that children are by nature inherently different from adults—except insofar as all of us humans are inherently, in our inevitably different weavings of discourse, different from each other. I certainly don't think that children are in any way beyond the pale of adult humanity and in need of being brought inside that pale, for their own good. I do, however, want to insist on an acknowledgement of the ways in which most cultural conceptions of childhood establish a world for children that purports to differentiate them as a group from adults as a group—a difference that inevitably affects any child even marginally connected to contemporary cultural discourse, and one that often disempowers children by virtue of

attempts to protect them from their own presumed weaknesses. And I believe that difference creates an obligation for critics of children's literature—an ethical obligation to consider the possible ways in which their work might eventually have a real effect on children, most obviously by means of how adult readers of the criticism might bring it into play in their actual dealings with youngsters. To put it another way, unless we remember that real children exist and that our actions as children's literature critics can harm or help them, we are more likely to do harm than good.

As I understand Lesnik-Oberstein and other members of the Reading group, they would have some trouble with that—although they, too, would claim an ethical reason for their position. Describing her project as "a writing and thinking about children's literature that does not rest on—or reintroduce at some point, overtly or indirectly—the real child, and a wider real of which it is a part" (19), Lesnik-Oberstein goes on to describe an alternative:

> Rather, then, than each critic endlessly re-finding finally, through whatever route, a child who can be known, and to whom their good can then be done, this volume will be proposing that an analysis of narratives—critical or otherwise—and how these can be understood to mean, in and of itself can contribute better to thinking through one's own actions and meanings. (20)

Lesnik-Oberstein claims that other critics, like me, resort to talking about the effects of literature on children in order to avoid what she calls "a heartless solipsism" (20). I have to admit that the focus on "one's own actions and meanings" that she recommends here does seem to me to be deeply, if not necessarily heartlessly, solipsistic. Indeed, that's why Butler's statement in *Precarious Life* about "the problem of a primary vulnerability to others, one that one cannot will away without ceasing to be human" reminded me of the sentence from Walsh I quoted at the beginning about the dangers of trying to touch the real. A focus on "one's own actions and meanings" without attempting to touch a real outside oneself seems a sure way to avoid that vulnerability.

Let me explain why that might be true by means of a swerve back to Butler's comment about the face that I quoted earlier. That Butler refers specifically to the face announces the ways her ideas relate to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, who, famously, built an ethics on the experience of the face-to-face—the encounter with the Other. For Levinas, "Absolutely present, in his face, the Other—without any metaphor—faces me"

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(qtd. in Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" 100). Another's face, merely in being present, announces a limit to solipsism—to what we are already ourselves. As Butler writes, discussing the ways in which fear of violence causes us to be violent to others, "The face of the Other comes to me from outside, and interrupts that narcissistic circuit" (138). So, I would argue, do real children. Alive and embodied in their multifaceted individual ways, hovering tantalizingly just beyond the grasp of our self-contained discourse about children and literature, they interrupt the narcissism of our work.

The narcissism interrupted by the face of the Other seems inherent in the view that there is nothing outside discourse. If I am in a discourse that has no exterior, if I am merely part of a network of discourse in which discourse addresses discourse, then there is no other to discourse—and no other to what I understand to be myself. What "I" am is merely a means by which discourse speaks to itself. It's intriguing, then, that Derrida, whose most famous sentence is the one about there being nothing outside of the text, should have focused his attention on the question of moving beyond, and did so often by means of readings of Levinas. In his 1964 essay, "Violence and Metaphysics," he offers a detailed analysis of Levinas's ethics of the face, beginning with a statement about the power available "in denouncing the blindness of theoretism, its inability to depart from itself towards absolute exteriority, toward the totally-other, the infinitely-other 'more objective than objectivity'" (87). He especially notes Levinas's focus on the Other as a way into ethics: "Face to face with the other within a glance *and* a speech which both maintain distance and interrupt all totalities, this being-together as separation precedes or exceeds society, collectivity, community . . . . It opens ethics" (95–96). And in later work, Derrida uses Levinas as a springboard for considering how hospitality—the vulnerable act of allowing others past our borders—might offer a way beyond the solipsism

of discourse. Indeed, as Leonard Lawlor suggests in his article on Derrida in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Derrida is attempting to 'un-close,' as much as possible, the sphericity or englobing of thought thinking itself—in order to open the link as wide as possible, open it to every single other, to any other whatsoever."

As "real" and therefore other to discourse, real, embodied children might represent the limits of the theoretism of discourse and the englobing of thought about children's literature as the Reading critics understand it—the end of solipsism and an opening into an ethics of responsibility to real children. As Butler suggests,

> the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. (26)

So too the bodies of real children. While they signify beyond what they are physically, they also exist beyond what they signify. In refusing to try to say anything about or to those embodied real children, discourse can speak only of and to itself. The refusal to do harm to others is a renunciation of any possibility of doing good.

Writing of her wish to do no harm, Lesnik-Oberstein herself asks, "Is this an abandonment of the child?" (20). She claims that would be the case only "if that 'human world' is presumed to be, necessarily, in existence and knowable and reachable" (20), and she and the other Reading critics make no such presumption. In other words, they don't need to worry about abandoning the child because they've already abandoned the idea of any place where real children might exist. Not wanting to give up on the world of things I believe I see and touch and feel, I have to ask the question again. Is this an abandonment of the child?

Well, it is clearly an abandonment of "the child"—of any generalized version of childlikeness. And that's a good thing. As I've pointed out numbingly often over the decades of my own work as a critic of children's literature, thoughtless writers and critics of children's literature all too often think of "the child"—in the child readers their texts imply and in their descriptions of how children read or should read—in ways that not only ignore the subtleties and variations of individual response, but also work to affirm narrow cultural definitions

of childhood and to repress real children into a depressing conformity to cultural ideas of appropriate childlikeness.

But while abandoning "the child" is clearly a good thing, abandoning children—real, embodied young human beings really alive in a real world we can really be aware of—seems like a different matter altogether. While trying to do good is always a dangerous procedure—always a possible doorway into arrogance toward those we conceive of as needing good done them—abandoning real children and evacuating them permanently from children's literature criticism seems to me like an easy and dangerous way of avoiding a difficult problem. What is needed, I believe, is a way of avoiding the dangers Lesnik-Oberstein and the other Reading critics rightly worry about that does not accept the apparent self-enclosedness of discourse, that never forgets the real existence of real children and other human beings and seeks continually to come into contact with those real, embodied beings outside it, in ways that honour their otherness to oneself rather than merely trying to drag them into discourse.

It seems to me, in fact, that that's exactly what critics like Rudd, McGillis, and me are trying to do in the moments where the Reading critics catch us contradicting ourselves. As Katharine Jones writes, "Lesnik-Oberstein seems to miss the point that many of these critics are not, in fact, appealing to the 'real child' but might, instead, be seeking to talk about both the construction of 'children' and the difficult area of children's lives and experiences" (294.) Exactly. And exactly the right thing to do, I believe, simply because it best represents the paradox of discourse—its apparent inability to represent what's outside itself even as it insists on that outside as being what it represents. Our rational knowledge, arrived at through a strict application of logic like Derrida's, that there is nothing outside of discourse does not—should not—forgive us from acting as if there were something outside of discourse, something which we have an ethical obligation to remember.

Concerning the work represented in *Children's Literature: New Approaches*, Lesnik-Oberstein writes, "the continued effort not to stabilize, to end, meaning is precisely the drive of the criticism in this volume, rather than precisely to end meaning by finally finding and fixing the child, which is what children's literature criticism has always wished for" (20). While I'm clearly not convinced that finding and fixing the child is in fact what children's literature criticism has always wished for, I do applaud the goal of destabilization Lesnik-Oberstein asserts here. It seems to me that literary criticism generally accomplishes the most when it tries to be always in the process of

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challenging its own certainties and assumptions. It also strikes me, however, that refusing to try to move beyond the borders of discourse—refusing contact with the real experiences of real children, for instance—is not likely to challenge the certainties and assumptions that are the primary constituents of discourse. All too often, I believe, criticism stagnates because it accepts its prison of discourse, and makes no attempt to contact the larger world outside itself. As long as scholars like the Reading critics believe that the research or writing they do can't or shouldn't attempt to reach children beyond and outside itself, then their work is unlikely to change anything in a world much in need of change—especially for children.

Meanwhile, the work can and does reach other children's literature critics—but as Peter Hunt suggests, in ways not necessarily productive of further knowledge. While it's flattering to have been named in a star-studded pantheon of villains, I've been finding it very difficult to respond to the positions the Reading critics put forward in anything like a spirit of dialogue. As I read their work, I have to keep resisting the urge just to snipe right back. I have a sense that for them, I, and Peter Hunt, and John Stephens, and Maria Nikolajeva, and David Rudd, and Rod McGillis, don't have any meaningful existence beyond the inevitably wrongheaded positions in discourse that some of our specific, individual sentences, carefully selected without much regard for their context, microscopically dissected, and sometimes, it seems, wilfully misunderstood, can be made to represent. Our work is only fodder for a pre-ordained agenda that requires us always to be shown wrong in the same wrongheaded way, so that all children's literature criticism can always be accused of being always about the same one thing. Because there is no attempt at dialogue in these efforts to demolish, there is no easy way of entering into dialogue with them.

As a result, I'm afraid, the work of these critics tends to be ignored in the children's literature criticism community at large. In a footnote to an early paragraph in her new book, *Radical Children's Literature*, listing kinds of criticism

children' literature critics do, Kim Reynolds writes, "I do not recognize Karín Lesnik-Oberstein's insistence that a majority of academics who write about children's literature criticism are primarily concerned with finding the right book for the right child" (184). It's hard to tell if Reynolds means she doesn't recognize that quality in the criticism or if she simply refuses to give Lesnik-Oberstein any attention, as the chair of a meeting might not recognize someone who wishes to speak.

That's a pity, because there's much in the work of Lesnik-Oberstein and her colleagues that deserves attention and needs to be recognized. There's a brilliant piece by Stephen Thomson in *Children's Literature: New Approaches* on Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials series; and, when they're not focusing obsessively on the negative faults of other critics, many of the other critics represented in the volume do at least imply some more positive alternative ways of thinking. Most of all, the problem they raise of how to make sense of the apparent contradictions in how critics of children's literature approach their work deserves much further attention. It can get that attention only if other members of the children's literature criticism community can find ways of entering into dialogue with those who appear so dismissive of the possibility that others are worthy of being conversed with. And unfortunately, those convinced of the self-enclosedness of their discourse seem to lose sight not just of the real existence of real children but also of the real existence of the real (and really thoughtful) human beings whose criticism their work discusses—real human beings they might learn more from and who might learn more from them if they were more willing to acknowledge a shared humanity and to take the chance of being undone by those with whom they share it.

One of the people I asked to read an earlier draft of this piece asked why it should be a *CCL/LCJ* editorial—what it had to do with this journal. Good question. The answer, I think, is that the questions about the ethics of children's literature criticism opened up by the work of the Reading critics are not just ones I'd like to see raised by work published here, but also, I believe, ones that all of us who care about the journal and its subject need always to be considering. As I understand it, *CCL/LCJ* aspires to be a forum for work that acknowledges the ongoing precariousness of everyone involved in it—the young people who are the subject and the implied, potential, and actual readers of the texts it addresses; the authors, producers, and purchasers of those texts; the critics and theorists with whom the work engages; and the audience that reads the published work in the journal and

makes use of it in its own dealings with adults and children. The journal is inside the text, in other words, but ideally, always hoping to make contact with real, embodied beings outside it; always recognizing the faces it speaks about and for and to; and always, therefore, trying to speak in ways that might help us undo each other.

I leave it to *CCL/LCJ* readers to consider how the contents of this issue might be fulfilling those aspirations. And I'd be pleased to be undone by responses to this editorial that we might consider for publication in CCL/LCJ in the future.

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Perry Nodelman's new novel in Scholastic Canada's Dear Canada series, *Not a Nickel to Spare: The Great Depression Diary of Sally Cohen*, was published this past spring.