Prioritizing Children's Writing: Rewards, Risks, and Repercussions

—Kiera Vaclavik

In the course of an article which amply demonstrates the efficacy of our field as a theoretical litmus test, Sebastian Chapleau touches on various definitions of literature (as "travail réfléchi d'écriture"/reflective written work, [118]; "écriture consciente, désireuse de lecture"/self-conscious writing, seeking readers, [119]). Given Terry Eagleton's arch-condescension toward children's literature, highlighted in the quote from Nodelman, it's perhaps only right that Chapleau doesn't mention him directly. Yet Eagleton's definition of literature as a "highly valued kind of writing" is extremely useful, and not only for its pithiness (10). As happens so often in the definitional domain, Eagleton's three words raise as many questions as they answer, most notably: valued by whom? Academics? Critics? Publishers? Readers? Writers? Relatives of writers? Men? Women? Children? Blacks? Whites? For centuries, the valuers who mattered and who called the shots were of course predominantly white, male, and middle class, and what they decided to allow into or leave out from the canon invariably matched their own particulars. Yet despite its considerable draw, not everyone has wanted to join this club, and it is partly for this reason that we speak of "women's writing" much more frequently than of "women's literature."[1] In this context, "writing" does not relegate such work, nor convey any sense of inferiority or insufficiency. Instead, it serves to cast the critical net wider to include private production not necessarily designed for publication, such as letters and diaries, as well as focusing attention on processes rather than end products. For all of these reasons, and rather than seeking to extend what is already a capacious umbrella term, it seems to me to be eminently preferable to employ the term "children's writing"

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instead of, or—better still—in conjunction with, "children's literature." However problematic, we should perhaps retain the term "children's literature" in order to designate writing produced wholly, or in large part, for children, and/or read extensively by them, as well as the work on such writing (referred to by Chapleau [116]). For both the literary texts and the scholarly research, a distinct identity has steadily been carved out and status has been accrued as the results of hard-fought battles over the past half-century, and it would be a shame to throw them away. The objects of study that Chapleau champions—which have perhaps always (to return to Eagleton's definition) been valued, but usually only by a relatively limited circle comprising family, friends, and teachers—could be known in contradistinction as "children's writing." The distinction with "children's literature" would be far from watertight—but what distinction ever is?

Howsoever we choose to designate the material forming the gauntlet Chapleau throws down in his article, should it be taken up? How feasible is such an endeavour? What would be its benefits? And what might be its repercussions? It seems to me that there is a great deal of children's writing (as I will continue to refer to it) that can greatly assist our undertakings in the field of children's literature. Adult critics look at other adults' written responses to the texts they study, since any scholarly article is ultimately a subjective reading, however wide-ranging. It therefore seems wholly reasonable that critics should also attend to the writing produced by children in response to their reading, whether in letters to authors or in creative writing inspired by works of children's literature. The inclusion of such sources is wholly practicable: the material is there, especially in the many fan-fiction websites that have emerged in recent years.[2] Taking into account what children write in response to the books they read will bring children's literature studies in line with other fields where children's views, behaviour, and creative processes are closely observed. For example, Minna Ruckenstein's ongoing anthropological study of dolls involves observation of, and discussion with, their child users. But, crucially, it also incorporates interviews with the adults purchasing these dolls. As Ruckenstein

argued in a recent conference paper, children's responses are heavily shaped by adult influences and therefore cannot and should not be studied in isolation.

Similarly, it seems to me that various difficulties arise with respect to the study of children's writing without reference to children's literature. What, firstly, would be the purpose of such studies? Previous neglect on the part of literary critics is not, I think, sufficient reason. But perhaps studying children's writing would serve to help understand the ways in which children express themselves; to shed light on children's own centres of interest; to tell us something about the act of writing; or of the nature of literature. Perhaps it would open up a whole range of things of which we haven't yet dreamt, that would only emerge once the work was undertaken. . . . But how are we to go about such work? One of the principal practical problems, it seems to me, is that of selection. What kinds of texts should be studied: those which are voluntarily produced or those set as exercises in pedagogical settings? If we are interested in creativity and written expression, can we legitimately limit ourselves to writing as it is traditionally conceived—the letters and diaries to which Chapleau refers—or should we also take into account blogs, text-messages, MSN messaging exchanges? And if we are interested in creativity, the scope surely must be extended even further to include modes of dress, doodles, even styles of covering (old fashioned!) books. . . . Chapleau seems rather hostile to any selection process, equating and aligning such processes with marginalization (116). Yet selection is inevitable: no one can read all the books *for* children being published every year, and the same must be equally true of the material *by* them (see Ezratty).

None of this is, I imagine, insurmountable: the formulation of pointed and precise research questions would eliminate or at least diminish many of these difficulties. But I have other, less easily resolved misgivings about the study of children's writing in isolation (i.e. independent of interest in children's literature). Chapleau refers repeatedly to the effacement, relegation, and disrespect of the child on the part of adults, both in children's literature studies and in society as a whole. Yet it seems to me that many adults are more than ready to appreciate and value (in all senses of the term) the creations of children. Although remaining a tiny proportion of overall output, the past decade has seen the publication of a batch of works by very young writers such as Michael Dowling, Christopher Paolini, and Catherine Webb. In view of the success of these works, publishers are constantly on the lookout for more. Whether such keen interest is good for

the child creator, and for children in general, is less clear. As Amir Bar-Lev's 2007 documentary, *My Kid Could Paint That*, suggests, an adult's presence and influence will be discernible in any creative work by a child (and by extension we can infer that an adult-free zone is as naïve and impossible in children's writing as it is in children's literature). But what Bar-Lev's film really underlines is the potentially detrimental effect of adult interest in children's production: the extent of parental pressure on, and intervention in, the creations of Bar-Lev's four-year-old subject, Marla Olmstead, remains a moot point even by the close of the film, but at the very least it seems likely that the media circus surrounding the child and her family had a less-than-positive effect upon them all. My concern is that critical interest in children's writings may move the goalposts in an undoubtedly well-intentioned but ultimately injurious manner. Might we not be bringing about a situation in which children find themselves under pressure to perform and create? Might we rob children of space for creativity in our very efforts to understand and appreciate it? Isn't there a risk that we would inhibit children through our attentions? Without being excessively nostalgic or sentimental, it is possible to regard childhood (in contemporary Western society at least) as constituting a period of apprenticeship, providing a space in which to experiment and develop. There is something comforting about knowing that unlike, say, Keats or Rimbaud, most writers don't start publishing their work until later in life. This was certainly my own experience: I wrote quite a lot as a child and felt reassured that most of the authors I liked hadn't published in their teens, but I was also acutely conscious that time was passing quickly and that I was rapidly catching up, approaching the point at which their first works were published. That Michel Tournier published his first novel at the age of 40 offers a similar sense of reassurance to me today.

But, it might be objected, why should children aspire only to adult writing? Why shouldn't they value and seek to emulate the productions of their peers: after all, if children's writing is good enough for adult critics, surely it must also be good enough for children themselves. But such egalitarianism is, I think, wrong-headed and potentially pernicious. Such valorization could seriously impede and undermine efforts toward linguistic progress and mastery. Of course, such language smacks of some of the very worst elements of Western patriarchy and I'm liable to be shot down in flames at this point for my retrograde conservatism. Yet it's all very well for academics (who have spent much of their lives grappling with the intricacies of language) to decry this; the helpfulness of such attitudes for children themselves is highly limited

Scholars of children's literature in Modern Language departments are few and far between, and work being carried out on writing in languages other than English has a strong metropolitan focus (compare, for example, the amount of research to have been undertaken on children's literature published in France and that concerned with texts produced in, say, North Africa or the Caribbean).

at best. Like artists trained in draftsmanship but turning to abstract expressionism, choosing to discard or experiment with grammar and spelling, having first mastered them, is one thing; being incapable of using them is quite another. On the one hand, there is control and confidence, on the other, fear and vulnerability.

Finally, just as we are obliged to make choices about the material comprising our corpora, so too are we forced into selecting and prioritizing in terms of the focus of our studies. The question, simply put, is whether it is children's writing which most urgently requires our attentions at the current time. Perhaps not. Albeit not unreservedly, Chapleau praises Anglo-Saxon universities for their attendance—in both teaching and research—to "new" fields including children's literature. Via reference to various encyclopedic projects by scholars in Europe and America, he also alludes to the processes of legitimization (which, it should be noted, make his own efforts to probe and pose difficult, unsettling questions all the more necessary and important) currently underway within the field. While I do to some extent share Chapleau's view of the current situation and am fortunate enough to be working within such an environment, it nevertheless seems to me that in our Anglo-Saxon universities and scholarship, it is also Anglo-Saxon children's literature—and children—who reign supreme. Scholars of children's literature in Modern Language departments are few and far between, and work being carried out on writing in languages other than English has a strong metropolitan focus

(compare, for example, the amount of research to have been undertaken on children's literature published in France and that concerned with texts produced in, say, North Africa or the Caribbean). Having itself long suffered from this bias toward the perceived centre, the study of children's literature and its proponents should perhaps know better. Colonialism is very much apparent in the study of children's literature but not, it seems to me and as argued above, in the manner outlined by Chapleau, wherein children and their productions are marginalized and looked down upon. One way in which colonialism does manifest itself, however, is in the tendency to overlook anything but Western middle-class children and their experiences of childhood. Colonialism can also be seen in the perhaps unconscious but nevertheless wholly inappropriate assimilationist reflexes apparent in several discussions of children's literature. For example, children's laureate Michael Rosen recently gave a talk at London Metropolitan University in which he traced a standard history of children's book publishing in Britain, beginning with John Newbery and Mary Cooper's *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Songbook*. Later in the talk came references to the Grimm brothers, E. T. A. Hoffman, and Erich Kästner. Few would dispute the pivotal role of the Grimms' fairy tales in Victorian Britain and after, but to speak of them in the same breath as Alice or Harry Potter, with absolutely no reference to a different cultural context of production, is at best highly problematic. While I fully advocate Chapleau's contestation and interrogation of the canon, it seems to me that combatting unconscious colonialism of this type, broadening horizons beyond the Anglo-American and European, and attending to issues of cultural transfer are considerably more urgent than the isolated study of children's writing, with all the practical and ethical complexities it entails.

Notes

[1] Alexander and McMaster (cited by Chapleau on p 113) are unusual in this respect.

[2] Examples of fan fiction websites include: <http://www.fanfiction.net> and <http://www.harrypotterfanfiction.com>.

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