My Own False Face: A Response to Marianne Micros's Interview with Welwyn Wilton Katz

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I feel the need to respond to Marianne Micros' interview of Welwyn Katz simply because it touches on so many different parts of my own life — and because much of what Katz and Micros agree on, if true, would have the effect of rather drastically separating those parts of me from each other, making me as painfully divided a creature as any of Katz's own compellingly conflicted characters. And yet I don't, in fact, feel that conflicted or that torn — or perhaps more accurately, I do, and I rejoice in it. Let me explain.

I am, like Katz, a writer of children's fiction, and I share her feelings of irritation and anguish when readers, particularly adult critics, see things in my books I believe I didn't put there — especially things that, were they indeed present, would clearly proclaim my own personal lack of moral character. Katz reports her distress over Cornelia Hoogland's reading of her novels, a reading that sees the novels as establishing sets of binary opposites and enforcing choices amongst them in a way that "disallows tensions which need to be voiced" (Hoogland 33). I felt an exactly equivalent distress when, just after my picture book *Alice Falls Apart* first came out, my publishers reported to me that a bookstore manager had refused to stock it. The book is about a girl having a bad day, the kind of day in which you feel you're just *falling* to pieces. The device of the book is that Alice does literally fall apart, and then has to cope with a large crowd of her different quarrelling selves (much as Micros and Katz's comments imply I ought to be warring with myself — I sense a theme developing here). The bookstore manager in question saw something much darker afoot. She was convinced that Alice was a clear example of multiple personality disorder — and since that disease is the result of sexual abuse, decided the book was inappropriate for young readers.

And then, just last week, a colleague told me that some of the university students studying my novel *The Same Place But Different* in his children's

fiction course objected to the moment when my young hero Johnny Nesbit responds with some noticeable enthusiasm as Jenny Greenteeth, a fairy enchantress, directs her charms toward him. They said that my letting this young male teenager get excited by a beautiful, sexy woman obviously meant that I, the author, was a dirty old man. Dirty, perhaps — but old? Me? I understand why Katz might worry that, "when a book is labelled 'politically incorrect,' then the *author* will be branded with the same words" (57).

Nevertheless, I am also a critic — exactly the kind of critic whom Micros describes as "an adult academic, who, reading against the intended reader, reads the book ... as a sociological map" (57), and whom Katz describes as "reading a book through a particular lens, or theory" (57). Katz goes on to suggest that this sort of reading is an act by academics of "destroying the part of the book that had once been alive," of "bringing to it [the book] the ammunition that goes with their own agenda" (57), and of looking "at books as meat to be torn to pieces and destroyed" (57). I dislike and reject these images of mayhem and butchery. I understand that deconstruction is not, as Katz says, "destruction," but an effort to become aware of the constructed nature of texts, the ways in which they work rhetorically to persuade us, not always beneficially, about who we are and what world we live in. Furthermore, I've just reread Katz's *False Face* and *Out of the Dark*, and am happy to report that, despite Hoogland and Kertzer's artillery, and despite or possibly even because of my perceptions of their constructedness, they remain very much alive — powerfully so. But I can't deny that in my hundred-or-so articles about children's books, I've often had negative things to say; and many of the negative things had to do with my perceptions of political and ideological content of which writers may or may not have been aware. What Katz and Micros call "sociology" I call necessary and important analysis.

I am, then, both the good guy and the bad guy here, both a besieged author in sympathy with another besieged author and a besieging critic in agreement, I must admit, with the besieging critics in question, Cornelia Hoogland and Adrienne Kertzer. For, as much as I empathize with Katz, I believe both Hoogland and Kertzer have valuable and important insights into her work. I'll explain why later.

Meanwhile: I was, in fact, the guest editor of the issue of *CCL* in which Hoogland's article appeared. In other words, I was one of the academics who reviewed and decided to publish this critical description of the ways in which two of Katz's books seem to be reinforcing polarized oppositions rather than suggesting less divisive ways of negotiating between them. I was also, however, one of the three judges of the Groundwood International Fiction contest — personally responsible, therefore, for the fact that *False Face*, one of the novels by Katz in question, won this important prize. And in addition to seeing the justice of some of Hoogland's and Kertzer's criticisms

of this book, I have to admit that I also, still, greatly admire it. It is, as I said, a powerful book — and so is *Out of the Dark*.

In *False Face*, Katz's character Laney views one of the Iroquois masks of the title as "black for hate, red for love, the thin line dividing the two" (68) and Laney's friend Tom thinks of "Black and red opposing one another, evil and good together" (78). In terms of the clear divisions Micros and Katz establish between writers and academic critics, between those who write and read books for pleasure and those who are hostile and academic and analytical and theoretical, I ought myself to be much like that mask, a singularly divided entity with a thin but clear demarcation between my warring parts: Perry Falls Apart. In fact, I don't feel the least bit at war with myself. The novelist in me, being me, does not revile the work of the critic. The critic, being me also, may disagree with the negative or, in my opinion, uncomprehending comments of some readers of my novels, but does not wish them to be silent or to silence them. The me who is both these people delights in a world which allows him to be both, equally values both, and sees great merit in the ongoing dialogue between them. Towards the end of *False Face*, Laney thinks of "the black and the red, the hating and the loving, two savage eternal halves struggling beneath the civilized appearances" (149). I accept the equivalent eternity of the division between writer and critic in myself, but I see it neither as savage nor even as much of a struggle—more like a friendly and productive conversation.

Let me, then, outline what the critic in me understands about his part in this conversation — and why he rejects the warfare between academic theorist and novelist that both Micros and Katz tend to take for granted.

Micros bases her opposition to "critics who read books as if they were sociological documents" (57) on the fact that such readings are "against the intended reader" (57). Katz says, "I would like my reader to forget for a brief space of time that she's a professor teaching the book or a literary critic judging the book as to its political correctness or interpreting it in the light of the newest theory. I want readers to *become* Ben [the protagonist of *Out of the Dark*], to cry for him as I did" (52). What unites these two positions is the conviction that the critic's business is, primarily and exclusively, what authors intend to have happen when readers read their books. I reject this idea for a number of reasons.

The first of these has to do with authority — perhaps, even, parental authority. Katz tells us that she thinks of her character Ben as a son: "what I am saying is that I love Ben the way any mother who gives birth to a child loves that child. I did give birth to him ... and I understand him deep to his core ..." (52). As a novelist, I share the feeling that bringing a book into the world is something like having a child (although I can't say I feel anything like a father to my characters, who are too much like me for me to wish or imagine myself their parent — what a horror story!). But I find myself desper-

ately resisting the idea that I absolutely understand my novels or the characters in them, any more than I absolutely understand the real human beings I have fathered. Those people, now adults, are deeply (and delightfully) mysterious to me — separate beings in their own right, people who often act against my expectations, even, sometimes, my wishes, and who have effects on others that surprise me. And I think it would be blind of me to imagine that they weren't mysterious, that they were, indeed, exactly what I intended them to be when I tried to help shape their values and work habits in their younger years. If I ever did have the authority to impose my view on them in that way, I no longer have it now.

Nor do I want that authority. As I read Katz's description of her maternal feelings for her characters—and later in the interview, for her books — I remembered a famous comment of Northrop Frye's:

> ... poems, like poets, are born and not made. The poet's task is to deliver the poem in as uninjured a state as possible, and if the poem is alive, it is equally anxious to be rid of him, and screams to be cut loose from his private memories and associations, his desire for self-expression, and all the other navel-strings and feeding tubes of his ego. The critic takes over where the poet leaves off.... (11)

As a writer of fiction, I work hard to make a book do what I want it to do — have the effect I intend and hope it will have on my future readers. In much the same way, I spent a lot of time as a parent of still-developing children working to help them become the kind of honourable, thoughtful, energetic human beings I hoped they might become. But my understanding of my role as a parent was primarily that I was working hard to put myself out of business — to end up with people who didn't need parenting, didn't need me to protect them or care for them or explain them to others because they could do all that for themselves. Similarly, I believe, once a book is published it's cut loose from me and my control of it. I don't like it when others misunderstand it, any more than I like the ways in which other human beings mistreat or misunderstand my actual children now that they've left the security and protection of the home I provided for them. But I know in both cases that there's nothing much I can do about it, that my own words about my books or my children are really not any more authoritative than anybody else's — that when I talk about them I'm just another voice in the conversation about them. All I can do is hope that I did my job well, and that both books and children are strong enough to defend themselves against any of the slings and arrows that are bound to head in their direction.

I also know it's a good thing there isn't much I can do about it. After I've done with them, my books belong to my readers — all books do, surely, once they're published. Their readers are all different people, and will inevitably read the books in different ways — many of those ways at odds with

my own understandings of them. Reader-response theory reveals how very much the text of a novel is merely a recipe — instructions that allow readers to make a novel happen as they engage with the text. Just as cooks understand "a dash of Worcestershire sauce" in terms of their previous cooking experience, readers follow the instructions of a text by filling its inevitable gaps — the information it evokes but doesn't actually provide — in terms of their own personal repertoire of knowledge and experience. A dash for me might be a surfeit for you. While we all read the same words in a text, then— say, for instance, the phrase "academic puzzles" in the poem by Barbara Novak that Katz quotes at the beginning of *False Face*—we all understand them in terms of our own situation. Some readers will read "academic puzzles" as meaning dry and lifeless and deathly, as I suspect Novak intended; but being myself an academic and a person who derives great pleasure from thinking things through, I read "academic puzzles" as a promise of joyful excitement and valuable understanding and insight.

I do, of course, realize that Novak didn't want or expect that response. I see how she intended her poem to be about how dangerous it is to expose and analyse the secrets of the heart. That's exactly what offends me: if I read these words of hers in terms of my own repertoire, as I inevitably must, then I have to realize that Novak is simply taking it for granted that something I greatly enjoy and believe to be life-affirming, something central to my very being, is an act of murder. I do not wish to forget my annoyance about that — it's more important to me than Novak's intentions, and I believe it ought to be more important.

We readers are individual human beings with individual human feelings and human responses, and we read best when we read in terms of those feelings and responses — when we let ourselves engage authentically with the texts we read. To try to blot out our selves and become some strangely nonexistent (and non-human) "intended reader," as Micros seems to be demanding, would be not only unauthentic, but strangely detached and uninvolving. It's not the kind of reading I would wish for my own novels. I want my readers to read them in terms of exactly the people they are — to enter into their own real dialogues with my books even if it means they end up with the judgment that I'm a dirty old man. What Katz sees as novels being "torn to pieces and bits of them taken to build some other person's theory" (64) I see as merely a negative way of describing a positive act. Reading in terms of "some other person's theory" is what we always do when we read, and what we always ought to be doing. We necessarily read in terms of our own personal beliefs and principles, including the theories of others we are persuaded by and committed to, as Hoogland is clearly and passionately committed to the ideas of Edward Said.

There is, perhaps, a paradox here. Katz says that she'd like her reader "to forget for a brief space of time that she is a professor reading a book"

exactly because what she wants from readers is not detachment, but involvement: "I want a reader to *become* Ben." She might, then, argue, that people like me and the professor of this sentence of hers are, because of our dangerously academic modes of thought, our commitment to theory, bound to be unfortunately detached rather than correctly involved. Because of the kind of person I am and the kind of responses I do genuinely have, what I call being personally involved in the text — reading as who I am — comes to be viewed as an act of non-involvement.

But for me, the salient fact is that, in order to be involved in the way Katz would like, the professor and I would have, as she says, to "forget" who we are; we could only become involved by dis-involving and disenfranchising ourselves. We adults cannot read children's books by becoming children simply because we are not children, and because we cannot actually know how children or anybody else but ourselves might actually read anything. Pretending otherwise is not a good idea for any reader.

Consider, for instance, a non-academic young reader of aboriginal background. In *False Face*, as young Tom flees in terror from the horror of the mask, Katz says, "He was all Indian now, an Iroquois fleeing for his life" (25). I think I know what she intends — that Tom, who is usually confused about his half-white, half-aboriginal background, acts here purely in terms of his absolute faith in the dark power of the mask. But I wouldn't be surprised if a young reader who had been on the receiving end of a whole range of all-too-common prejudices against natives felt hurt by the idea that the act of fleeing from danger rather than facing it is what defines someone as Indian and not white. Should that happen, I believe that young reader would be entitled to his reading, entitled to refuse to "become" Tom, entitled to his feelings of hurt or anger and entitled to express them, no matter how far at odds they are with the intentions of the author of the book.

But I'm not the author whose intentions are being ignored here. Maybe I'm being too easy on myself. Consider, then, one of my own young readers. I was in a grade six classroom, reading from my novel *Behaving Bradley*, in which a boy gets involved in his high school's efforts to develop a code of conduct. At one point in the book, Brad goes around the school gathering suggestions from other students about what to put in the code; the section I read to the class was the list of suggestions he gathers, a list that reveals the bad conduct of just about everybody, including the suggesters. The grade six students laughed at the list, as I hoped they would. But afterwards, an African-Canadian girl came up to me and asked why I'd put in the part about somebody suggesting that a boy in grade nine stop calling people "Pakis and Jungle Bunnies." I told her that I wanted the book to be like reality, and that, unfortunately, people really did use these words. I assured her that Bradley himself was upset by it and clearly said so in the

book — and so was I. In other words, I intended this to be an attack on racist language, not an approval of it.

But I could tell from the look on the girl's face that that wasn't enough. She had found the language hurtful, and that was all that really mattered to her. And I still have to say, she was entitled to her hurt. It was real. It matters. If I work with the hope that readers really will engage themselves with what I write, really become involved with it in personal terms, then I have to accept engagements that I didn't really want and don't personally like. I even have to allow the responses of readers who know current theory and are passionately committed to it in ways that make them see aspects of my books I'm not aware of—as for instance, I allow but do not agree with my friend Rod McGillis's comments in a theoretically-informed article published in *CCL* about how *The Same Place But Different* replicates conventional and counter-productive views of masculinity. It comes, I think, with the territory.

Katz expresses the concern that the kind of reading of her books that academics like Hoogland and Kertzer (and McGillis?) do leads to censorship: "librarians in small public libraries are still told by certain powerful other librarians that I am a controversial writer, and some teachers are even told that they should not teach my books" (64). If that's true — and in the current censorious climate, I have all too little reason to doubt that it is — then it's deeply and tragically unfortunate. I hate the idea that a librarian or a teacher would remove a book and silence an author simply because it was "controversial," or even because some readers managed to have negative ways of reading it. I equally hate the idea that the way to prevent this from happening is to silence readers like Kertzer and Hoogland and McGillis and me. Censorship of negative criticism based on sincere and committed readings of books is, surely, not a good way to promote anti-censorship.

So what, then, might be a good way to promote anti-censorship? I think the answer can be found right here, in this discussion — in Kertzer and Hoogland's willingness and opportunity to enter into dialogue with Katz's novels, in Katz and Micros's willingness and opportunity to enter into dialogue with Kertzer and Hoogland, in my own willingness and opportunity to respond to Katz. We can engage in these encounters with each others' writings only so long as the writings are there to engage with — as long as none of them, not Katz's and not Hoogland's and Kertzer's, has been censored into silence and non-existence. And we want to engage in them, I suspect, because all of us understand the degree to which all forms of writing are incomplete recipes for dialogue, invitations to negotiate our own responses and tell each other and other readers about them. If we operate with an understanding of how very much our engagements with books are dialogues, then we will, surely, allow and rejoice in as wide a range of dialogues as possible, from readers of every sort — not just from those committed to what they believe the author intended. In this scheme of things, no one

would be allowed to hide my book behind the librarian's desk because it reminds someone of multiple personality disorder or because one of its characters uses racist language or represents a counterproductive masculinity; and at the same time, no readers would be prevented from talking about how these matters do or do not affect them, and about how they think they ought to affect other readers also.

And that includes, perhaps especially includes, children. The assumption of the censors Katz rightfully worries about is always the same: that whereas I, the censor, respond to what I perceive as racism or sexism or whatever and am horrified by it, child readers will not be so horrified — the gullible little dears will simply accept what they read as true, and that's why we have to keep these dangerous books out of their hands. (I think this is what the grade six girl who heard *Behaving Bradley* was most worried about— other children would hear this language and use it.) If there's any truth in this underestimation of the good sense of children, it emerges from the fact that so many adults work hard to keep children gullible — not just to deprive them of supposedly dangerous knowledge, but also, to encourage them to read so they identify with and learn from characters. Both Micros and Katz appear to approve of this sort of reading — to "become Ben," as an "intended reader" would, is to read with and not against or apart from the book, with and not against or apart from the character, to see the world as he sees it. Indeed, Katz speaks approvingly of her perception that "Most readers, and especially children, read a story from beginning to end, and, as far as I know, don't interrupt themselves to think upon topics such as divorce, race, point of view, etc." (51).

I don't share that perception. I find it hard to imagine that readers personally involved in a divorce could read a story about divorce or intolerance without some consciousness of its possible connection to themselves, especially when "relating to" or "identifying with" fictional characters are our currently most common reading practices. In *Out of the Dark*, in fact, Ben himself reads Norse mythology in terms of his own concerns about his mother's death and his move to a new, strange place. I think that makes him a good reader, not a bad one — he reads to connect himself to what he reads, not simply to immerse himself in a story, blot out himself and his own interest, and become someone else. Indeed, his problems deepen when he *does* immerse himself in the stories — he must force himself finally not to lose himself and "become" the Viking Tor.

Furthermore, I think it's good that Ben intervenes with what he reads in this way. I wish more children could do it — and could do it exactly in terms of the critical and theoretical stances adopted by Kertzer and Hoogland (and McGillis and me). If there's danger for children in reading fiction, it's only there for truly gullible readers, readers who do become "intended readers" and buy absolutely into whatever view of the world or themselves a

book happens to be selling. There may be little apparent harm in a reader "becoming" Ben — although I can certainly see why Hoogland thinks there might be. But there is certainly great potential harm in young readers "becoming" the self-centred, cold-hearted heroes and heroines of Goosebumps or Animorphs. Not all characters in children's fiction are worth becoming.

The skill that will protect child readers from danger might well make them more thoughtful readers, more critical thinkers, about all books, all texts, all things. They might well be less capable of just being absorbed into a book, disappearing into its view of things. I have to see that as a loss worth the gain. The girl who worried about "Jungle Bunnies" was better off than a child who simply got thoughtlessly absorbed in my book and thoughtlessly began to use the scurrilous language of some of its characters. She and her classmates would be better off in a classroom that read *False Face* in the context of a free, open, and possibly sometimes negative discussion of it than in a classroom that pretended the book didn't exist in order to silence its presumably negative qualities.

Such discussions are pleasurable. So is the thinking from which they emerge. Micros suggests that academic writers who read against texts "have lost the pleasure of reading" (65). Not so. Thinking is not the binary opposite of pleasure. It can be an enormous pleasure in itself — surely a main pleasure offered by the act of reading. Being in the possession of a range of theoretical strategies that allow one to think about what one reads in a variety of interesting ways equips one, not to kill texts, but to keep them alive, pleasurable and stimulating subjects of thought for ourselves and other readers.

Consider, for instance, the text of the Katz interview. In his discussion of the separation of texts from their authors, Frye goes on to say that "every poet has his private mythology, his own spectroscopic band or peculiar formation of symbols, of much of which he is quite unconscious" (11). If I assume that's true of all texts and read Katz's words in terms of some theoretical strategies I happen to possess and value, I can see a number of things in it she might not see herself — things that help me to understand her books, and not necessarily in unflattering ways.

First, on the question of mothers. Katz says, not just that Ben is her son, but also that she deeply identifies with him: "I generally enter the mind[s] and heart[s] of the adolescent protagonists at a very deep level, as deep as I can go in my imagination" (54). I find this matter of being both mother and the person one mothers fascinating. As I suggested earlier, I'm not convinced we parents aren't deluding ourselves when we think we understand our children. I might, superficially, accuse Katz of offering her young readers characters to identify with who actually represent maternal wish-fulfilment fantasies, children as a mother might like to imagine them and might hope for adolescent readers to become. But I suspect the situation is more complicated than that.

One reason I have that suspicion is the interesting fact that Ben, a creation of Katz's whom she says she thinks of as a son, himself creates a model of a Viking ship — and gives it the name of his own dead mother, thus strangely inverting Katz's own actions. Having maternally created this surrogate mother, furthermore, Ben worries about how others will treat it once it has left his hands: "When they had her, they would hurt her. That's what people like that did" (163). This is strangely reminiscent of Katz's attitudes to her own character and her critics as expressed in the interview. It's therefore good to see how Ben moves past his need to protect, and finds his enemies less hostile than he imagined.

Another complicating factor is another paradoxical statement — that the teenagers in Katz's daughter's Japanese Anime Club think of her as being "one of them" when they call her by the name of "the only mother figure in one of their favourite animation series" (55). How can someone both be one of a group of teenagers and a mother to them? It sounds impossible, an attempt to occupy two different and even opposite positions at the same time (as Ben is somehow both son and mother to "Frances" in *Out of the Dark*). And in this way, it mirrors much of what Katz says about her writing throughout the interview. She says, "I think that I become a bit schizophrenic when I write. I am both me, the tactician and writer, *and* whichever main character I have chosen to be the point-of-view character for the scene" (54). She also says, "what I hope from my reader is a kind of dichotomy: that the reader, while retaining the intelligence to put together clues about my character's dilemma, on an emotional level will 'become' my character" (52).

Three things become apparent to me here. First, as Kertzer's article suggests, Katz's thinking is often centred on questions of motherhood. Second, Katz does very much think in terms of binaries, and in terms of oppositions between them, between being a mother figure and being a teenager, between reading with involvement and reading as destruction, between characters as individuals and characters as representations of types. But, third, Katz keeps suggesting ways in which the opposites her mind plays with must be seen as somehow both true at the same time — expressive of exactly that hybrid mixture of supposedly opposed forces that Hoogland claims is lacking in Katz's novels. Katz sees herself as neither mother nor not-mother, neither writer-creator nor created character, but both at the same time; and her suggestion that readers should at the same time "become" characters *and* think about them reveals a parallel state of oppositional hybridity.

If I go back and read *False Face* in the light of what I find in the interview, I see how very much the novel, too, is built around binary opposites — not merely the division between white and aboriginal within Tom, but also between the two opposing sides of the False Face masks, between each of the two central masks as one tries to control the other, between Laney and Tom as representing opposite assumptions and as alternating focalized charac-

ters, between the business values of Laney's mother and the scholarly attitudes of her father, between Laney's loner status and her sister's popularity, between the development and preservation of the bog, between the museum and the antique shop, between doing art for oneself and doing it for acclaim, and so on and so on. But all that is fairly obvious; the important question is, does Katz here, as in her interview, strive to find ways of accommodating both sides of the oppositions, to make them both true at the same time? Hoogland says she doesn't. I'm not so sure.

It's certainly true that the characters who represent the opposite poles that war within the masks and with Tom and Laney are flamboyantly oppositional. But they must be, in order for the book to establish the divided mask as representative of Tom and Laney's divisive situation, inside each of them and between each other. The book would have less clarity, and be much less intense and involving, if Laney's mother were less caught up in money-making or her father less of an impractical dreamer, or if Tom had met a variety of different people on his trip back to the reserve, some of whom might have been happy to accept him as he is. Even so, there are signs at the end of the novel that Laney's mother has a softer side, her father a tougher one, that they are less one-sided and oppositional than they pretend to be — each a set of warring characteristics within and together possibly becoming more willing to accept each other's oppositeness. It seems that something similar happens to Laney and Tom.

But the novel itself, unfortunately, declares otherwise. At the end, Tom thinks of his own tears as "not red and not black, not White and not Indian. Just tears from someone who was a person, nothing else" (145). This clearly implies that Tom is most significantly a unique individual — a being essentially separate from his racial background. And in terms of how I read the novel as a whole up to this point, this rings false to me.

It rings false, first, in human terms. I resist the conclusion that what we humans essentially are is something inside us, an invisible entity separate from our bodies and our physical being. To have a body, to be a being with and not just in a body, is to have a skin — a skin whose colour does indeed signal our connections with various other people past and present in a variety of ways. It matters. To dismiss it is to dismiss a significant aspect of what it means to be human and to live with other people.

But more important in this context, it rings false to me in terms of how I understand the novel up to this point. Tom is, to be sure, not white and not Indian — but as the entire book seems to be asserting, that doesn't mean he is not white *and* Indian — a hybrid combination of theoretically distinct and often warring forces. The logic of the book would suggest that Tom should end up proud to be what the mask itself is when it is its best self, not one thing or the other, but two halves in harmony, both different but not necessar-

ily warring things at once. And so too, Laney, in terms of the ways in which she has both her father and mother in her life and in her character.

In other words: I have a sense that the novel itself implies a more subtle reading of the situation than the boldly assertive language of its conclusion implies. I suspect the same is also true of *Out of the Dark.* Its resolution occurs so quickly, and its end follows so soon after, that it seems to be implying the same unconvincingly easy solution to the problem—the forgetting of racial and other differences in the name of a shared humanity—in a way that misrepresents the rich complexities of the story so far. In both cases, then, I see what it is that Hoogland focuses on; but I also sense something larger and deeper and more interesting struggling to express itself and not quite finding the language to do so.

I sense that because I re-read these books after reading Hoogland's and Kertzer's articles and then Katz's response to them. All three writers offered information about their own perceptions of the books that caused me to want to revisit the books and rethink my own readings of them. My rethinking has caused me to appreciate them in ways I didn't before. I'm glad for that. And I think it's important for me to point out that none of us read the novels in ways that blotted out our own individual concerns in the service of some imagined intended reader — not the three of us who are critics, obviously, but not Katz either. She knows far too much of what she did as a writer and how she wants her work to be understood to be able to read the finished book without a distorting vested interest, a theory of her own that may or may not match what the novels themselves actually do manage to do.

My conclusion, then, is that the sorts of readings for which Katz expresses such dismay are not inherently destructive. Ideally, they open up dialogues, and good books, and, like these two novels of Katz's, can survive all kinds of dialogues. According to Frank Kermode, "The success of interpretive argument as a means of conferring or endorsing value is ... not to be measured by the survival of the comment but by the survival of the object. Of course, an interpretation may live on in the tradition on which later comment is formed, either by acceptance or reaction; but its primary purpose is to provide the medium in which its object survives" (67). I think that's true. It means that texts that don't get discussed by a wide variety of readers disappear from view, cease to be of interest to any readers at all. Discussion, even especially negative discussion, is what keeps texts alive.

This current discussion means that Katz's novels are very much alive — and I think, very much deserve to be so. Indeed, the mere fact that so many readers feel the power of these books strongly enough to wish to express their concerns about them reveals how very much alive the books are. I find myself hoping desperately for similar critical attention for my own books.

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