Marianne Micros's Response

• *Marianne Micros* •

My interview of Welwyn Katz in *CCL* 90 (24.2) has received several responses from critic/writers. I have read the responses, and I have attempted to look at them objectively. This is difficult since, to be honest, I was deeply disturbed by some of the statements. I understand Welwyn's feelings when reading negative criticisms of her words; I can also understand the objections expressed by those who felt attacked by Welwyn (and by me). These responses to criticism demonstrate that our writing — whether creative or critical — is personal to us, especially since our reputations can be affected. However, as individuals, we all have our own theories about literature, our own unique experiences of life, our own ways of practicing the craft of writing as a means of expressing our views.

Welwyn, Marianne, Adrienne, Perry, and Cornelia — we are all writers and analysts, yet we do not define analysis, intellectual activity, reading, or pleasure in the same way. Because of this, we can misread each other and misunderstand each other's views and intentions. I believe that we each have intentions when we write and that we might (unconsciously or consciously) have a particular reader in mind, although we must acknowledge that an actual reader is often different in some way from that implied reader. It should not surprise us when we find we are misunderstood — but it does, and the misinterpretations can wound us. I do not mean to suggest that there is only one way to read a book or article. Of course there isn't and there shouldn't be. I agree with Wolfgang Iser that there are many "indeterminate elements" in texts, but I myself cannot go so far as to believe that misreadings are impossible, as some other reader-response theorists claim.

I believe that each individual reads in his or her own way and that some of those differences are determined by age, level of education, experience, and other factors, including individual personality. In my research into child reading, I have been intrigued by theories proposed by Peter Hunt and by Perry Nodelman. Hunt says that the child reader is able to "surrender to the book on its own terms" (and that there might be times when an adult can do this as well). Perry believes that children read differently sim-

ply because they haven't lived as long as adults or had so many experiences. However, I object, as I say on pp. 51-2 of the interview, to the classification of books by age groups, to labelling based on certain "intended readers." Every child cannot be labelled by his or her age, since children grow and learn at different rates and have different interests.

Nevertheless, those who write for children must have some understanding of what most children like to read in order to write successfully for them. Children's books are marketed as such, and they do stand out as different from adult literature in some ways. There is a difference between children's books and adult books, child readers and adult readers, reading styles of children and adults, even though it is true that not all children, nor all adults, read alike.

Given these differences, what happens when an adult reads a child's book for academic purposes? Adult analysis of children's books is a useful, beneficial, and necessary project done by adults who teach these texts, buy them for children, or wish to discuss them with other adults or with children. Nevertheless, I believe that academic critics may at times read a book in a way which distorts it. If that reader becomes angry at a book, thinking it is faulty in some way (which may or may not be the case), he or she is probably not reading with pleasure and delight. I did not mean to imply that everyone must read a book in the same way, but I do believe that an application of theories from outside the book (ones not evident to "young" readers in age or heart) can distort or spoil the book.

When I said that academic critics might be "reading against the intended reader," it is true that I was distinguishing between reading a book and analyzing a book. Is reading the same as critiquing or analyzing? Is it reading when one begins analyzing according to theoretical models? I'm not sure. To me reading is sitting in a big comfortable chair with a book in my hand and a bowl of popcorn on my lap. Of course I cannot help analyzing when I read — I am an adult with a PhD who teaches literary analysis — I can't help but think, analyze, apply. But when I *read* for pleasure, I don't underline, stop to check references, or check the books of theory on my desk. In fact, I don't sit at a desk at all. I lose myself in the book and the popcorn. I let the whole experience enclose me and engulf me, and I try hard to shut out those voices whispering, "Analyze me. Deconstruct me." However, I also get great pleasure out of analyzing books, an activity which can lead to fuller and more complex responses to a text, though I find this a different kind of pleasure than the pleasure of simple reading. Although I can't help but analyze as I read a book, it happens naturally and to a different extent than it does when I read with a pencil in my hand, making notes and underlining.

I was especially displeased to see that these respondents —Adrienne, Perry, and Cornelia — believe that I, and Welwyn as well, are "anti-intellectual," that we oppose analysis entirely, and reject the idea that analytical

reading can be pleasurable. Because I don't particularly enjoy certain types of criticism, it doesn't necessarily follow that I am against all analysis and find no pleasure in it. The same is true of Welwyn. She does welcome "informed discussion" (Cornelia's phrase) of her books, but she has felt that some critical commentary has misrepresented her books. Nor do I believe that "emotional responses to a work [should] be divorced from intellectual consideration" (Cornelia's response). That is a misinterpretation of my words.

I did say that I thought that "there are *some* academic writers who have lost the pleasure of reading." I did not say that *all* critics have lost the pleasure of reading. I do not myself find pleasure in judging a book by imposing theoretical structures from the outside or in policing a text for political correctness — but some critics might find these acts pleasurable. I give one example as to why I believe that reading literature could become a lost pleasure in the academic world. Ask a graduate student in a university English Department what he or she is working on. The answer is rarely "Edmund Spenser" or "Emily Bronte" or "Ezra Pound" or "Welwyn Katz" — but instead a particular theory or theorist. Sometimes theory actually replaces the reading and close perusal of the primary text. I think there is a place for this type of theorizing — but I would not call it "reading for pleasure."

As evidence of the pleasure I derive from analysis, I would like to explain the class presentation that I described at the beginning of the interview. This presentation, totally conceived and performed by students, was not an attack against Cornelia, though she apparently takes it as such, nor against any other critics. Each student used some type of theory or issue in an analysis of *False Face*. These approaches were not mocked or belittled, but shown to be valid and interesting ways of discussing the book. The student who played the role of Welwyn gave what he thought would be the author's positions. All this was thoughtfully done, with my support, since one of my pleasures is teaching literary analysis, something I do in every class. I entered (and completed) PhD studies because I love the whole process of literary analysis. I encouraged the students to read Adrienne's and Cornelia's articles because I wanted them to learn to look at a book from all sides and in every possible way. I also wanted them to think about a living author who wants and deserves the opportunity to respond to criticisms of her works. That, too, was my real purpose in interviewing Welwyn — to allow her that opportunity. I did not "prompt" her, but was in fact responding to what I already knew were her concerns.

Another misinterpretation occurred in Adrienne's rendering of my review of Sandra Birdsell's *The Town That Floated Away* that appeared in the same issue as the interview. I decided to write a non-traditional review, one that would explore the process I underwent in my attempt to analyze the book. I was having difficulty finding a reading stance for myself and wondered why. The book seemed to suggest allegorical readings which didn't

quite materialize while retaining a playfully childlike tone. Though trying to understand readers of different ages, I was not labelling readers according to any strict criteria. In fact, at the end of the process I had undertaken, I found that my response to the book was the same whether I tried to read as a child or as an analytical adult. The approaches to reading that I tried out had fused into one. I had discovered for myself that one cannot categorize a reader by age or by ability to analyze.

I suggest everyone become aware of his/her own reading process, just as an exercise, as I did in my review. This is what Perry did in his response to the interview. He assessed and re-assessed himself as reader and writer; he reread the interview, the articles in question, and the books themselves. He came up with new readings of Welwyn's books and shared something of himself with us. He made me think about myself, as critic and writer. Are these two selves in opposition to each other? Can I rejoice in that, as Perry does? I have had more difficulties with these different roles than Perry has, it seems, though I have now reconciled some of those differences. I hope I reach Perry's stage, of finding the writer and critic within himself engaging in "a friendly and productive conversation." That is just what we all should be doing: writers and critics, all of us readers, need to be conversing. Let something productive come out of this conversation, something that does not ignore our humanity, our emotions, and our intellectual processes (all of which, I agree, exist together, if not always harmoniously).

In actuality, all of us — Welwyn, Cornelia, Adrienne, Perry, and I — agree that literature should be read and analyzed, discussed and debated. Certainly, works that carry messages of hate and bigotry should be criticized — but that is not true of Welwyn's works. Can one blame her, then, for feeling that she has been subjected to the same binary thinking for which she is criticized in her work? Can one blame her for objecting to a reading that accuses her of binary thinking, when it is her male protagonist, who belongs to two cultures and is an adolescent, who struggles with binary thinking, not the author herself? In fact, Welwyn's book *False Face* shows us the divisiveness caused by binary thinking and the falsity and hatred that can cause, or result from, labelling and stereotyping. Can one blame her for feeling that her work has been colonized by others? It is easy to say a writer should not take what she sees as misrepresentations personally — but it *is personal*, especially to a writer who writes out of deep emotions and convictions.

I'd like to come back to one of the main topics of the interview — the silencing of a writer. Can a writer be silenced? Even if a writer continues to write, her works, especially if they have been labelled as "politically incorrect" in negative reviews and critical articles, might not be purchased for bookstores and libraries. A writer can indeed be prevented from writing because of others' impressions. Censorship and silencing of a writer can take place on many levels, as has been emphatically demonstrated in *CCL*'s cen-

sorship issue, which details this process and its financial consequences to a writer [available on line at http://www.uoguelph.ca/englit/ccl/].

The critics who responded to the *CCL* interview I did with Welwyn have shown by their comments that they were offended by Welwyn's objections to their words, just as she was offended by their words in the first place; they obviously had invested something personal in their critical writing, just as Welwyn has in her fiction. Surely we must *all* be allowed to voice our opinions, but we should try to be as fair as possible, understanding and accepting that we all can have biases.

We should celebrate our differences and recognize our very human emotions. Intellect and emotion are indeed inseparable in readers, as Cornelia argues. They are also inseparable within writers and critics — during and after the writing process. This is very evident in the responses of these critics to the interview.

I have written poems about the silencing of the artist, including one called "Island," set on the island of Delos: These are the last three stanzas:

> the boat will leave without her
> no hands will wave no smiles of goodbye
> if she misses the boat she must climb
> up to watch its slow progress to
> there wherever the next island
> the other harbour
>
> she will be absent
> cut out from her own history
> a blank space in the photograph
> of the tourists coming home
>
> nor is she here —
> forbidden to be born or
> die here she can do neither
> only rest in between
>
> Marianne Micros

Marianne Micros *earned her PhD from the University of Western Ontario and has published in numerous critical and literary journals. She is the author of* ***Upstairs Over the Ice Cream****, a collection of poetry, and continues to write poetry, as well as novels for young readers, one of which is under consideration by a publisher. Her most recent critical article is "Et in Ontario Ego: The Pastoral Ideal and the Blazon Tradition in Alice Munro's 'Lichen'" in* ***Essays on Canadian Writing*** *66 (1999), a special issue on Alice Munro. She teaches early modern literature, children's literature, and theoretical approaches to literature at the University of Guelph.*