



What Children's Writing? Read by Whom, How, and To What Ends?

—Peter E. Cumming

Have children—their voices, worldviews, cultures, and reading and writing practices—been glaringly absent from the academic study of children's literature as literature? Without doubt. Should they continue to be thus marginalized? Definitely not. Do adults need to respect children and children's own cultures more? Most certainly. Can an academy substantially transformed through poststructuralist, postcolonial, postmodern, reader-response, feminist, and queer theories now come to accommodate new ways of thinking about children and their reading and writing? Possibly. But also, I suspect, slowly, in a culture in which children remain second-class citizens, members of a sub-species of the human race, and consequently in which children's literature (dismissed as "kitty litter" by one of my award-winning colleagues) does not always receive the academic respect it deserves. Do children's

writings have "tant à apporter" (Chapleau 123) to the study of children's literature? Perhaps. But that is something we do not know . . . because we have not yet paid attention. Would paying serious attention to children's writing and reading destabilize or enrich traditional adult academic study of children's literature? Hopefully both. But what precisely is that "so much" that children's writing can bring to children's literature? What is the "so much" that we adults can discover there? Need a study of children's writing be limited to the juvenilia of canonical adult authors? Of course not. Will all children's writing be equally worthy of study? No. Can children's writing be relevant to children's literature? Perhaps, but what writing, approached in what ways, by whom, how, and to what ends? "Écriture enfantine" or "littérature enfantine" or both? As a window for adults into the secret corners of children's lives? As

an interrogation of adult-authored literature and adult power? As a fundamental challenge to the traditional production and reception of children's literature?

The foundational questions Sebastien Chapleau poses in "Quand l'enfant parle et que l'adulte se met à écouter, ou la littérature enfantine de retour à sa source" invoke rather more questions than answers. Like Chapleau, "je n'ai pas de réponse définitive à ce problème, seulement un esprit de questionnement et quelques idées" (120). Chapleau's manifesto does what manifestos do well: it offers a timely challenge to conventional ways of thinking and a clarion call to arms—in this case, to attend to the remarkable lacuna of writing by children in so-called children's literature. The details on the ground, however, may not be quite as clear, simple, or self-evident as his manifesto sometimes implies. His theoretical musings call out for specific test cases from children's actual writing. The few examples of children's writing Chapleau offers are not particularly persuasive, perhaps unable to bear the freight of his optimistic argument. Embarking on such a radical and hopeful enterprise, then, may require some cautions and qualifications. For our old habits as imperialistic adults making forays into children's territories die hard, our myopia when looking into children's lives and cultures from the outside

remains strong, and both may be inevitable, given widespread and deeply rooted power inequities between adults and children.

One of Chapleau's epigraphs poses Perry Nodelman's question about whether it would really "make a difference if we discussed more texts by children . . . if the people doing the discussing were still adults? Wouldn't it be less imperious [to have] . . . discussions of texts by children written by children?" (qtd. in Chapleau 112–13). The question of who will read children's writing (and how) is an important one, not unrelated to the question of who reads (and how they read) adult-authored children's literature. For me, "childist" readings of children's literature (*pace* Peter Hunt) need not be limited to either children's or adult readings but may more profitably be viewed as both/and readings: adult readings informed by children's readings. In other words, adults do no favours if they check their critical faculties at the door, even though they need to recognize their position when they take their places as, in Peter Hollindale's memorable phrase, "guests at the table of children's literature" (29). Mary Galbraith usefully qualifies Hunt's "childist" praxis by arguing that "childhood and adulthood positions with respect to each other must be articulated," thus offering the important caveat that both "insider"/child and "outsider"/adult perspectives



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in dialogue are necessary and desirable in childist readings (198). As Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, "outsidedness"—here, our unavoidable "outsidedness" as adults studying children's reading and writing—is "a most powerful factor in understanding," indeed, one in which a dialogic encounter between two cultures results in "mutual enrichment" (6–7). Therefore, we should aim for readings of children's writing that are part of a mutual enterprise between child and adult readers: to empower child writers and readers it is surely not necessary to disempower (but merely to humble) adult readers.

With Chapleau, I welcome new attention to children's writing in the study of children's literature, but I think it also imperative to ask from the outset what specifically literary interest we have in writing by children. Chapleau's invocation of the uses of children's writing in Education, Psychology, and Sociology is helpful only to the extent that it recognizes that children's writing is used in those disciplines, not in any possible analogous application of *how* children's writing is

used in those disciplines to how children's writing might figure in children's Literature. (Media Studies might offer more applicable insights.) If research on children's writing were to become only a kind of cultural strip-mining to reveal more about children, not unlike some current uses of adult-authored literature for children being restricted to how such texts represent childhood, then such research would clearly belong more in "Child Studies" (in Education, Psychology, and Sociology) rather than in children's literature. If research on children's writing is to be part of children's literature, surely it must be the literary nature of such writing that should be our focus.

Chapleau recognizes the risk inherent in Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster's emphasis on children's writing by people who later became canonical adult authors: valuing children's writing primarily in relation to the adult writing it becomes (just as children are often valued not for themselves but as adults in training). In fairness, Alexander and McMaster recognize this limitation: their book focuses "on those scribbling children

who achieved greatness as adults, because a new study of juvenilia must begin somewhere. But alongside these child incarnations of adult authors are some whose writing is also full of percipience and zest, but who did not become adult writers” (2). There is, however, another risk that Chapleau does not sufficiently address: that of abandoning the “literature” in children’s literature by attempting to reorient attention exclusively or predominantly to the “children” in children’s literature. Is there not a danger of valuing children’s writing as merely offering insight into “children” (say, for example, their purported psychological developmental stages) to the detriment of considering children’s writing as literature (for example, what and how children write and why that matters)? For example, what might the nature of our interest as adult literary scholars be in the samples of children’s writings to which Chapleau points us—the seemingly everyday letters of Celia Morris to Anne and Shezara Francis’s fictional account of Michael Mulandi’s voyage to the South Pole? In suggesting this, I have no desire to foreclose the broad and generous definitions of, and approaches to, “literature,” “literary,” and “text” that most scholars in both adult and children’s literature currently embrace. But I do think it important to distinguish between directing concerted attention, simplistically speaking, to both the content

and form of children’s writing as writing and approaches of other disciplines more concerned with what that writing exposes about children as children. What useful intersections, then, might there be between children’s writing and children’s literature?

Chapleau’s argument seems to assume that all children’s writing will be of interest, as, in one sense, it might be; however, having conducted numerous writing workshops as a teacher and writer with child writers, I would be hard pressed to accept all children’s writing as having literary interest (any more than I could be persuaded that all adult writing does). On what grounds, though, should adult readers determine which texts are worthy of interest, say, in issues of narratology, representation, wordplay, characterization, focalization, or intertextuality, without being in danger of closing down the possibilities of children’s writing/literature operating in quite different ways from adult writing/literature? If H el ene Cixous, offering examples of writers of * criture feminine*, identifies at least one such writer as male (1092), is it possible that * criture enfantine* might be written by someone who is not a “child”—that is, not under eighteen years of age? For that matter, what are the implications of Alexander and McMaster extending their definition of “juvenilia” to include “works by writers

up to twenty . . . with some leeway beyond” (3)—indeed, their recognizing that Branwell Brontë’s “early writings, even those he wrote when he was thirty-one, are commonly referred to as ‘juvenilia’” (2)? Conversely, what do we do with writing that is by “children” (those under eighteen) yet which seems thoroughly co-opted (either as “bad” or “good” writing) by conventions of “adult” writing? As we expand or shrink our definitions of “children” and “young people,” how will we redefine “children’s” or “young people’s” writing?

Chapleau seems to follow Alexander and McMaster’s overly optimistic lead in relation to both wide availability and “authenticity” of children’s writing: Alexander and McMaster claim that “for centuries children have been taking the pen into their hands, and writing,” that “the child’s expression of his or her own subjectivity is there and available for us, if we will only take the time to pay attention,” and that “the time has come to listen to the authentic literary voice of the child” (1). But where is this plentiful, authentic children’s writing, and will it transparently display children’s subjectivity once we adult readers simply open our eyes? Indeed, how will we determine the “authenticity” of the child’s literary voice “to the extent that we can identify such a thing” (Alexander and McMaster 1)? Chapleau cites Jacqueline Rose’s claim that “to say that the child

is inside the [adult-authored children’s] book is to fall straight into a trap” (qtd. in Chapleau 115), but to assume that “the child” is directly and transparently accessible “inside children’s writing” would be to fall straight into another trap. If, as Rose argues, “children’s fiction [written by adults] builds an image of the child inside the book . . . in order to secure the child who is outside the book” (qtd. in Chapleau 115), what, we might ask, does children’s writing do in relation to child and adult readers in its representation of children?


As literary scholars, what kinds of children’s writing will we seek? Will we focus only or mainly on those exceptional “literary” texts written and published by “children,” whether they go on to become adult writers or not? Daisy Ashford’s *The Young Visitors, or, Mr. Salteena’s Plan*, written when she was nine, published in 1919? *The Diary of Anne Frank*, written when she was thirteen, both in its “original” diary pages and her rewritten diary and subsequent edited forms and adaptations into other media? Dorothy Straight’s *How the World Began*, written when she was four years old? S. E. Hinton’s bestselling novel *The Outsiders*, written when she was fifteen and published when she was seventeen? Canadian Gordon Korman’s novel, *This Can’t Be Happening at MacDonald Hall!*, written as a grade seven class project (and the additional five novels he published by the time he graduated

from high school)? *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*, a memoir of drug abuse and street prostitution, published when Evelyn Lau was eighteen? “Christopher Paolini’s epic-fantasy *Eragon*, written when he was 15”; “Flavia Bujor’s *The Prophecy of the Stones*—a best-seller in France and Germany in . . . the year she turned 14” (Hulbert); or Nancy Yi Fan’s fantasy novel *Swordbird*, begun when she was ten, and published with worldwide hoopla in 2007 when she was eleven? (For more examples, see “Child Authors” and Peterson and Robertson.) If we do focus on texts such as these, how will we deal with the substantial adult mediation in considering them as children’s own literature? (Nancy Yi Fan’s “Acknowledgments” begin by describing the genesis of her novel “when I was a child of ten romping in the deep forests on the hills of Hamilton, New York . . . [and] I sat down in front of the computer and began writing my first novel” but goes on to express “heartfelt thanks” to at least sixteen adults—editors, publishers, teachers, neighbours—as well as perhaps one child, “my terrific sidekick,” Mother Nature, and three pet birds [217–19].)


How will we deal with “contaminated” children’s writing—writing that represents some sort of collaboration between child and adult writers? For example, how shall we analyze fifteen-year-old Canadian Craig Kielburger’s *Free*

the Children: A Young Man’s Personal Crusade Against Child Labor, written “with” Kevin Major, a Canadian writer for young adults, or, for that matter, how shall we analyze the Special 10th Anniversary Edition that no longer acknowledges Major’s collaboration?

Will we analyze the writing of children for literary journals produced by schools or literary competitions sponsored by educational bodies, service groups, and private companies? For example, each year in Canada, stationery giant Staples (Business Depot) sponsors an annual writing competition for children ages four to thirteen, publishing the winning pieces in a collection of children’s writings that address an assigned theme. How will we deal with adult mediation—from the initial framing of such projects through their selection, editing, and publishing? Will we seek children’s writing closer to source, soliciting it, for example, from school creative-writing programs? The case of a Canadian seventeen-year-old creative-writing student, expelled from school for ending a short story with the implied murder of a teacher by a female student who dislikes the science teacher’s “intoxicating odor”—“Sorry, Mr. Adams, but school’s out!” (Whitlock), merely begins to suggest how many layers of imposed censorship and self-censorship will inevitably lie between adult



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readers and the "authentic literary voice" of "child" writers. If adult-authored children's literature is severely constrained in its representations of controversial subject matter, including children and sexuality, death, violence, language, and narrative closure, how much more will most children's writing be "always already" constrained by adult mediation—in the home, at school, or in any "publication"?

Even if, as academic researchers, we were to set out to solicit children's writing directly for study, such research would inevitably have major ethical constraints placed on it, especially given that we are dealing with "children." Also, should we not question a generic bias toward non-fiction and fiction prose writing, seeking also young people's songs and poems? Why not direct our attention, for example, toward the lyrics of Canadian wunderkind songwriter Avril Lavigne? Or to "one of America's best-selling poets—an invalid named Mattie Stepanek, who

broke into print at 11" (Hulbert)? Or to the League of Canadian Poets, which has hosted *Youngpoets.ca* since 1991 and publishes *Re:verse*, a bilingual (English-French) "zine" for poets "19 and younger"? Perhaps only on the Internet, as Chapleau, following Reynolds, suggests, might a quantity of children's writing be currently available for study, particularly as Reynolds argues, in "fan fiction" (180). Paradoxically, though, the "authentic literary voice of the child" may appear to be readily accessible and yet still be heavily mediated even in the relatively democratic reaches of the World Wide Web. On the one hand, as Reynolds points out, certain types of fan fiction may enable "a new vision for sex and power relationships in culture" (182); on the other hand, "Fan fiction sites have some very clear rules, many of them derived from the practices of traditional book publishing. Before they will be posted, texts must be deemed by webmasters to be well written, well presented, and their content must be appropriate

for the target audience . . . signaling, for instance, whether a story contains explicit sexual material” (181). Moreover, the ephemerality, privacy, and collaborative nature of children’s digital writing—email correspondence, texting, chatting, blogging, contributing to wikis, social networking, and role-playing-game contributions—may not provide ready access to children’s voices either, given that computer laptop screens close so readily when adults enter the room or Facebook sites clam up in embarrassment when old people over twenty-five join in (Google “old people on facebook”).

Children and young people live both within their own cultures (“secret” places, often defined in opposition to or separation from adult cultures) and in a still adult-dominated, adult-defined world. It is crucial that we do not romanticize child writers or readers (or children themselves) as being “pre-textual” or “extra-textual” but recognize, to the contrary, that they are inevitably and “postmodernly” intertextual. If, for example, the average Western child watches forty thousand television commercials per year (Schor 20), not to mention listening to stories, reading books, and watching movies and television, it would be both counter-intuitive and counter-productive for us to assume that children’s reading and writing are “innocent” practices, somehow completely outside the economy of adult reading and writing

practices. Rather, we need to be prepared for the possibility that *much* children’s writing will be formulaic, derivative, banal, conservative, or reactionary, in both content and form—as well as for the possibility that some children’s writing may be progressive and innovative, perhaps even raising new questions about the nature of narrative and reading praxis, not just for children’s literature but for all literature. Moreover, as with adult writing, we need to recognize that children’s writing can contain both innovative and thoroughly conventional moments in the same piece of writing. This still leaves us, of course, with the problem of deciding what children’s writing we will study, using what criteria for selection, and in what context we will study it. To recognize that all or most children’s writing has been ignored and to resist canonization of certain exceptional children’s texts does not mean that we must swing to the opposite extreme—namely, of assuming that all children’s writing is worthy of attention.

Neither intending to put words into Sebastien Chapleau’s mouth nor meaning to throw a “wet blanket” onto his optimistic and enthusiastic reading of children’s writing, I do feel that it is crucial that we recognize some critical challenges that face us as we embark upon the much-needed enterprise to which Chapleau calls us—the turning of our attention to an oddly and unjustly neglected

aspect of children's literature, namely, children's own writing/literature. In a nutshell, I would urge that we begin to ask ourselves some difficult but essential questions: What children's writing? Written by whom? Read by whom? How? And to what ends? Notably, what Chapleau calls "notre domaine d'études" is in the midst of substantial "childist" shifts as we write, shifts that will presumably embrace his emphasis on children's writing in children's literature. In addition to work by Peter Hunt, Aidan Chambers, Peter Hollindale, Mary Galbraith, Sebastien Chapleau, and others on "childist" reading praxis, and Chapleau's and others' timely reminders about children's writing, a worldwide growth of children's and childhood

studies programs will surely demand new, more child-centered approaches to children's literature. A fledgling, interdisciplinary, Canadian-based but internationally welcoming organization, the Association for Research in Cultures of Young People, is holding its first conference in Vancouver in June 2008. *CCL/LCJ* is itself now housed in the similarly named Centre for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures (CRYTC): the names of these separate organizations seem to broaden understandings of "child," "text," and "culture," while foregrounding ambiguities not only about who "young people" are but also about whether those "texts" and "cultures" are about, for, or by "young people," or, indeed, "all of the above."

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Peter Cumming is Assistant Professor in Children's Literature and Culture in the Children's Studies Program in the Division of Humanities, York University, Toronto. As a children's author and playwright, Peter has conducted numerous writing workshops with young writers.