Linguæ &

Rivista di lingue e culture moderne

1
2021

The Adult Reader of Children's Literature

edited by Jan Marten Ivo Klaver

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https://www.ledonline.it/linguae/ - Online ISSN 1724-8698 - Print ISSN 2281-8952 - ISBN 978-88-7916-981-3

Introduction: The Hidden Adult in Children's Literature

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.7358/ling-2021-001-klav

Children's literature has always been a literary genre that sits uneasily in the literary canon. In the first place, labels such as Victorian literature or women's literature refer to the writer of the text, while children's literature is very rarely written by children, and as a consequence the epithet is clearly audience-based. Moreover, although some books written for adults were recast as books for children – *Robinson Crusoe* is a point in case – even texts that directly aimed at child readers were still written, produced, marketed and bought by adults. And "these adults make their purchases on the basis of *their ideas* about what the children they purchase for like to and need to read" (Nodelman 2008, 5; my italics). That is part of what Perry Nodelman defines as the "hidden adult" behind texts written for children. But if these adult writers, publishers and shoppers are, as it were, hidden in plain sight, Nodelman's study also concentrates on better concealed adults in writers posing as child narrators who nevertheless present more or less recognisable adult morality, content, and knowledge. Hidden adults in children's literature thus raise questions about the adult audience as well. Can a book for children be seen as conveying a hidden (moral) message to the child's parents? Does it recreate a long-lost ideal of innocence for the grown-up reader? What marketing strategies entice an adult rather than a child to buy or to desire such literature? To what extent do writers of children's literature satisfy inner urges to write such literature? How does the writer of children's literature try to influence a potential adult reviewer? Such questions are central in modern studies of the genre, such as Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan; or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984) and, more recently, in the above-mentioned study by Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (2008). Many critics, though, have asked similar questions ever since the beginning of the Golden Age of Children's Literature in the 1850s.

A good example is the reception of Charles Kingsley's 1863 novel *The Water-Babies*, a book ostentatiously written for his four-year-old son. Although the bare fairy-tale plot of a young chimney sweep turning into a water-baby is undeniably suitable for young children, Kingsley's text is also crammed with discussions, digressions and jokes about contemporary issues that could have but very little meaning for them. A reviewer in *The Spectator* focussed on this with scornful sarcasm:

> He dedicates the book to his youngest son, Grenville Arthur, with the motto
> "Come, read me my riddle, my good little man;
> If you cannot read it, no grown-up folk can,"
> and we are quite content to abide by Grenville Arthur's judgment. If he understands the joke[s about legislation, politics, race, science and theology], we will pronounce Mr. Kingsley's tale a good fairy tale for children. (1863, 2037)

A reviewer in *The Examiner*, on the other hand, praised Kingsley for putting "a man's soul into a child's book" as it is "a most detestable thing, for a man to suppose he is condescending to amuse a small reader by the confection of such thoughts as he and all the blockheads suppose, theoretically, to be the thoughts most entertaining and instructive to young persons" (1863, 710).

One of the young readers in the early 1870s was Stephen Paget. He admitted in later life that as a boy he never got very far with the novel, but when he read it again as an adult it had matured as a bottle of good wine. And "as he slowly fills his glass, inhales its fragrance, sips, holds it to the light, sips again", Paget concludes that "It is not a book for good little boys; it is a book for good little old folk, who were actually there when all the things in it were really happening. We read it, not that we may feel young, but that we may feel old" (Paget 1921, 106-07).

Such opposing reactions to *Water-Babies* pose a series of questions about the nature of Kingsley's book. Was Kingsley simply a bad author of children's books and had no idea what was intellectually appropriate for a four-year-old child? Or, did Kingsley share the idea that one should not talk down to children and should therefore not eliminate themes that go beyond their comprehension? Or, perhaps, did Kingsley have a philosophical adult agenda for which he inserted on purpose themes and ideas for adult readers, a "hidden adult" for adult readers? The fact that *Water-Babies* was first published in instalments in *Macmillan's Magazine*, a serious monthly without illustrations which had never yet published tales for children, might make us pause before defining Kingsley's book a pure work for child readers.

The first three essays in this issue of *Linguæ &* are part of a call for papers that centred on the hidden adult in children's literature in order to investigate in what ways fiction that is intentionally written for children might have a hidden agenda for adult readers.

Tiziana Ingravallo looks at the way Charlotte Smith manipulates her text for young readers in order to bring out gender related reflections that concern political questions about motherhood. In *Rural Walks* (1795) Smith introduces a teacher figure who emphasizes the need for moral and intellectual emancipation. This is done by introducing in her *Walks* social questions which traditionally would not be part of children's literature, such as poverty, abolition of slavery, war and rights of women. Although Smith clearly wants to instil these values in her young readers, from Ingravallo's approach also emerges Smith's 'hidden' desire to encourage grown women to claim equal social status.

Jelena Reinhardt's contribution looks at a book published a century later. Although Kokoscha's fin-de-siècle novel *Die träumenden Knaben* (1908) was originally planned and commissioned as an illustrated book for children, it is usually defined by critics as a "fairy tale for adults" with a clear sensuous appeal for such readers. In her discussion, Reinhardt turns the concept of Nodelman's hidden adult on its head by arguing for a hidden child reader: "it's not about an author hiding behind the fairy tale, but rather about fairy tales hidden behind the author's overwhelming presence".

We move into the mid-twentienth century with Alice Spencer's essay, which concentrates on the way C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56) was influenced by John Masefield's children's classic *The Box of Delights* (1935). Although the two books have much in common in terms of literary tropes and settings, Spencer argues that there is a fundamental difference in the two authors' adult ideas of childhood: whereas Masefield works in a rousseauian ideal of childhood innocence, Lewis fears children's liability to corruption and sin. Therefore, "Childhood imagination and emotion, for Lewis, need to be harnessed and trained within a strict Christian pedagogical framework, not celebrated in and of themselves".

The three works discussed have in common a sense of origins, whether in terms of growth as a social being, as a sexual awareness or as a (threatened) loss of innocence. Jacqueline Rose aptly reminds us that "We can assume, therefore, that wherever childhood purity, or the idea of a primitive culture, is being promoted in one type of discourse, the excluded term of the opposition will be operating somewhere very close at hand" (Rose [1984] 1993, 50).

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