Children’s Literature
Also by Karín Lesnik-Oberstein

CHILDREN’S LITERATURE: Criticism and the Fictional Child
CHILDREN IN CULTURE: Approaches to Childhood (ed.)
CHILDREN IN LITERATURE (special section of The Yearbook of English Studies) (ed.)
Children’s Literature

New Approaches

Edited by

Karín Lesnik-Oberstein
To the memory of my father Max Lesnik Oberstein
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Contents

List of Illustrations ix

Acknowledgements x

Notes on Contributors xi

Chronology xiv

1 Introduction. Children’s Literature: New Approaches
   Karín Lesnik-Oberstein 1

2 Author and Authorship. Effigies of Effie:
   On Kipling’s Biographies
   Sue Walsh 25

3 Victorian Childhood. Reading Beyond the
   ‘Innocent Title’: Home Thoughts and Home Scenes
   Christine Sutphin 51

4 Reading. The Swiss Family Robinson as Virtual Reality
   J. Hillis Miller 78

5 The Implied Reader. Response and Responsibility: Theories
   of the Implied Reader in Children’s Literature Criticism
   Neil Cocks 93

6 Children’s Literature, Science and Faith: The Water-Babies
   Lila Marz Harper 118

   Familiar Stories: Family, Storytelling, and Ideology in
   Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials
   Stephen Thomson 144

8 Reading Intertextuality. The Natural and the Legitimate:
   Intertextuality in ‘Harry Potter’
   Daniela Caselli 168

9 National Identity. Where the Wild, Strange and Exotic
   Things Are: In Search of the Caribbean in Contemporary
   Children’s Literature
   Jacqueline Lazú 189
10 Landscapes: ‘Going foreign’ in Arthur Ransome’s
   Peter Duck
   Sarah Spooner

Index
List of Illustrations

3.1 Illustration for ‘The Queen of Hearts’, Houghton 59
3.2 Frontispiece from ‘The Women of England’ by W. Wetherhead and T. Allem [?] 60
3.3 Illustration depicting ‘Law and Justice’, Houghton 61
3.4 Illustration for ‘A Sick Child’, Houghton 62
3.5 Illustration for ‘The Chair Railway’, Houghton 64
3.6 Illustration for ‘Crippled Jane’, Houghton 67
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A chronology of significant publications for Children’s Literature Criticism and Theory (since 1900):

1

Introduction. Children’s Literature: New Approaches

Karín Lesnik-Oberstein

How and why does this book claim that its approaches to children’s literature are ‘new’? In order to explain this, I examine in this chapter what children’s literature critics already claim they do, and then contrast this with the approaches in the chapters in this volume, to demonstrate how and why these differ from what has come before in most previous criticism.

The academic study of children’s books, and the academic criticism of children’s literature have been seen to be part of the post-Second World War burgeoning of the study of popular culture in universities across the world. Whether it be media studies, or the study of, let’s say, sports, tourism, or popular music, areas which previously were seen to be the appropriate province solely of either amateur interest and participation, or professional training (in teaching or librarianship, for instance, or television, film, and radio production), have gained a substantial foothold in academia in terms of having their own undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses, textbooks, conferences, and academic teaching and research posts. Yet the academic status and position of some of these fields, and certainly of children’s literature, remains somewhat uncertain in several respects, as many children’s literature critics have commented. First, the idea that it is somehow suspect to study children’s literature in an academic context persists widely, both in the general media, in wider academia, and in some children’s literature criticism itself. It is seen as claiming a complexity or difficulty for something that is regarded, by definition, as simple, obvious and transparent, and, moreover, as valuable precisely for being so. Secondly, even though academic courses and publications in the field now have a considerable volume and history, it is also still unclear even within the field itself, and despite extensive debates on the issue, what exactly constitutes an ‘academic’ study of children’s literature and its criticism as opposed to, say, educational or librarianship courses and publications on children’s fiction. In fact, it is disputed whether such a separation is either possible or desirable. Roger Sell, for instance, has recently (2002) argued in an introduction to a book he edited that ‘especially as commentators on children’s
literature, the authors of the chapters which follow do not allow themselves to be wrong-footed by purely academic developments', which he sees as potentially ‘driv[ing] a wedge between children’s literature and the human world within which it occurs’.2

So, do other children’s literature critics agree with Roger Sell? What does the criticism see itself as being for and about, and how does it see itself as setting out to complete those aims? Now almost exactly 20 years ago, Jacqueline Rose wrote that there seemed to her to be a ‘project ... of a number of children’s book writers and children’s book critics, to establish the literary “value” and credentials of children’s writers and children’s book criticism ... [T]he ultimate fantasy, perhaps, of children’s book criticism [being] that it should come of age and do what the adults (that is adult critics) have been doing all along...’.3 Certainly many eminent children’s literature critics claim that developments of the kind Rose indicates have taken place, or are taking place, in the field, and that they see these developments as being fundamental. Peter Hunt, for instance, introduces his well-known book *Criticism, Theory, and Children’s Literature* by arguing that ‘[c]ritical theory may not seem to have much to do with children and books; but ... [g]ood work with children’s literature depends, ultimately, on coherent and thoughtful criticism, and good criticism depends on coherent and thoughtful theory’.4 He goes on to quote Anita Moss’s suggestion that ‘if we believe ... that children’s literature occupies a place in the tradition of all literature, we owe it to ourselves to explore what is going on in the field of literary criticism, even if we decide to reject it’, only to insist further that ‘[w]e cannot “decide to reject it”, because new theories in time change our habits of thought, and become the norm’.5

Peter Hunt here implicitly shares with Anita Moss the aim of the first part of Jacqueline Rose’s description of the ‘project’, namely the wish ‘to establish the literary “value” and credentials of children’s writers and children’s book criticism’, but disagrees with Moss in terms of the idea of what ‘literary criticism’ is, and what it can, or cannot, be said to do. To Moss, literary criticism is worth investigating as part of the effort to have children’s literature taken more seriously, but it also remains a separate field, an ‘add on’ which could be left to one side. To Hunt, on the other hand, it is something which is intrinsic to ‘habits of thought’, and although he feels that ‘[t]heory is an uncomfortable and uncomforting thing’, he argues it seeks ‘to explain what we might otherwise have thought was obvious[;] it draws attention to hidden problems’.6

What Hunt’s and Moss’s views do also share further here, however, is the idea that the relationship between children’s literature criticism and (adult) literary criticism or theory is relatively recent or even entirely new. For Moss, whose article was published in 1981, it is apparently something worth investigating, but this has not yet happened: its use or possible rejection are something yet to be explored. For Hunt, in his 1991 book,
the linking between children’s literature criticism and its adult counterparts (both literary criticism and theory) also still has to take place, for he writes that

[b]oth the children who read the books and most of the adults who deal with them either know nothing of decontextualized reading or literary value systems and cannot understand the point of them, seeing them as illogical and threatening. But criticism is changing. It has many valuable elements which can help us to understand how we understand; help us to work with texts and with people....The first chapter of this book examines the relationship between criticism, as it is becoming, and children’s literature.7

This claim in both Moss and Hunt that the encounter between discussions about children’s fiction and (adult) literary criticism and theory is new, or only just starting out, may, curiously, be seen to recur as a theme, as Rose also suggests in her comment about the ‘project’ of children’s literature criticism. Children’s literature critics in various ways claim repeatedly that this meeting of children’s literature, literary criticism, and theory (however they define them), is yet to begin, or has only recently started. In 1985, Aidan Chambers, as still quoted, significantly, again in 1991 by Peter Hunt, wonders ‘why those of us who attend to children’s literature are, or have been, so slow in drawing the two [literary theory and children’s literature criticism] together ourselves’;8 Roderick McGillis, in 1998, writes that ‘[a]ll these theoretical approaches may be, and have been, used by critics of children’s literature. Recent criticism has forthrightly applied the work of structuralists, deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, Freud, Jung, and so on to children’s books’;9 Fran Claggett, in her foreword to Lissa Paul’s 1998 Reading Otherways, writes that Paul ‘carefully elucidates the impact that recent and current critical thinking is having on the way we read a text’;10 John Stephens, in 1999, offers a summary of this thematic when he writes that

[i]n the course of the nineteen-nineties, there has been a steady trickle of notable books which attempt to place children’s literature within the context of those modern literary and cultural theories which post-date the various reader response criticisms, or within a particular facet of that newer body of theory ... we might also think of such books as reflecting a more general interest in newer theoretical ideas as well as having a leading or introductory function. In other words, can we look more widely at the framing of text by theory within contemporary critical practice, and discern some answers to the question, What [sic] are we interested in now?11
But David Rudd, in 2000, is still claiming that

My methodological approach to this work has developed out of a more general concern with the way children's literature has been treated in the past. Many traditional approaches seem to me to be seriously inadequate, and for a number of reasons. ... many simply lack any methodological grounding, being prone to both whimsy and subjective judgement ... even where more systematic investigations are undertaken, they are frequently too narrow ...  

While Roger Sell, finally, concludes in 2002 that ‘in 1968, John Rowe Townsend said there were two distinct categories of people who write about children’s literature: “book people” and “child people” ... Nowadays there is also a third category “theory people” ...’.  

Several critics can here, then, be seen to repeat a discomfort or dissatisfaction with previous forms of children’s literature criticism, as they see them, and to repeat too a claim to reform or renew children’s literature criticism in ways that will address prior problems. ‘New’ or ‘recent’ literary criticisms, theory, approaches, or methodologies, as they are variously called, are seen as being ways to bring to children’s literature criticism much-needed clarifications, corrections, or resolutions. It is here too then that we find formulated most clearly what the aims of these ‘new’ children’s literature criticisms are seen to be, how these aims are judged not to have been achieved, or not to have been achievable, in prior criticism, and how the new developments are taken to address the problems in better ways. In other words, what is seen to be at stake in children’s literature criticism; what it is for.

Peter Hunt, for instance, defines the aim of children’s literature criticism as ‘a way of approaching children’s literature which helps us to make informed choices from first principles, as it were’. In other words, for Hunt, children’s literature criticism is about how to choose books for children. And this is, of course, the classical definition of the field, and what it is seen to be about, so unsurprising as such: from Plato on, in Western culture, this has been the point of the discussion of how and why to select books for children to read. In the first century A.D. the Roman educator Quintilian, for instance, recommended certain readings for children, in this case Livy, as ‘clearest in style and most intelligible’, while he finds Cicero ‘agreeable even to beginners, and sufficiently intelligible’. 

In fact, I now go on to argue, this aim or goal – the choosing of good books for children – does not change from critic to critic, no matter how much they claim that they will be doing things differently, or applying new approaches or methodologies. The problem, I suggest, that they see in prior or other criticism is that, somehow, the wrong books are being selected for children, in the wrong way, or for the wrong reasons, and the role of the new or recent theory, as they will define and use it, is to show how and
why to make the right choices instead. In other words, the new theory is permitted to question or change everything about the criticism, at least apparently, but the final goal of children’s literature criticism itself – knowing how to choose the right book for the child – remains constant and unaffected. In this respect then I indeed argue that other children’s literature critics continue to agree with Roger Sell’s view, as quoted above, that children’s literature criticism is there, ultimately, for the benefit of the child; it being able to confer that benefit, moreover, and crucially, through its knowledge of both the child and the book.\(^{16}\) If I can demonstrate this to be the case, then three questions arise: first, what does it mean for critics to introduce a new theory without affecting the fundamental aim of the field? Or, secondly, to reverse the first question: what kind of theory permits its application without affecting the basic goal of children’s literature criticism? In other words, what can and does the theory affect, if not that? And thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, does that fundamental goal of the criticism need to be changed at all? Ought it to be changed? Isn’t the ability to know how to select the right books for the child exactly what children’s literature criticism wants to achieve, and should therefore continue pursuing?

In order to begin to suggest some answers to these three questions, let us return then to the work of some of the critics I quoted above as examples of advocates of a reform through new approaches or theory. I consider in detail how they see the problems of previous, or other, children’s literature criticism, and how they formulate their new theory, which is going to resolve those problems according to them, yet without, I suggest, impairing or changing their common final goal. Although referring to a range of critics, I look primarily at the arguments of two writers referred to by other children’s literature critics as important theorists in the field, Roderick McGillis and David Rudd.\(^{17}\) Of course, any selection of critical works to analyse will be arbitrary to some extent, no matter how much I try to rely on recommendations and citations from other critics in their writings as an indication of the perceived influence or relevance of their ideas to the field overall.\(^{18}\) On a pragmatic level, I do not address extensively here the work of some writers frequently mentioned in the context of theoretical innovation, such as Aidan Chambers, Peter Hollindale, Peter Hunt, Maria Nikolajeva, Perry Nodelman or John Stephens, either because other contributors to this volume look at their ideas extensively in their chapters in this volume, or have already done so elsewhere in similar ways to my analysis here. Neil Cocks, for instance, in looking in his chapter specifically at ideas of the ‘implied reader’ in children’s literature, considers Aidan Chambers’s views at greater length; Sue Walsh examines closely the ideas of U.C. Knoepflmacher in her chapter on children’s literature criticism and authorship, while she has analysed Perry Nodelman and Peter Hollindale’s work in several articles elsewhere;\(^{19}\) Daniela Caselli includes analyses of several recent writings on theoretical issues in relation specifically to J.K. Rowling’s ‘Harry Potter’ books