



Home Away from Home: One US Reader's Response to *Home Words*

—Philip Nel

Home Words: Discourses of Children's Literature in Canada, edited by Mavis Reimer, offers ten essays, each of which approaches the idea of "home" through a different critical lens. From Andrew O'Malley's examination of how Robinsonade narratives enact domesticity as colonization, to Louise Saldanha's thesis that Canadian multiculturalism offers more a strategy for managing difference than a genuine commitment to cultural pluralism, these chapters offer careful consideration of how and whom "home" includes and excludes. Taken collectively, they enact the socio-linguistic mapping of Raymond Williams's *Keywords*—on which the title of *Home Words* productively puns, and to which Reimer acknowledges her debt. As she notes in her introduction, "the multivalency of the concept of home means that senses can be separated from one another and opposed, as well as conflated with one another" (xv). In exploring these variant and conflicted meanings of "home," she chooses, wisely, to make the project "an untidy, rather than a finished,

one" (xii), thereby inviting readers to continue the conversation.

Embracing the spirit of the book, *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* asked that I evaluate the ideas in *Home Words* "in relation to other primary or secondary texts that are part of [my] current research," considering "how readily these discourses of home in Canadian texts for young people can be applied to texts published elsewhere," such as "American texts" (Lefebvre). Given my embarrassingly inadequate knowledge of Canadian children's literature, I welcomed the opportunity to acquaint myself with (at least) some of the scholarship and to bring the book's ideas to bear on texts more familiar to me—specifically, on the American children's picture books that I study and teach.

If Deborah Schnitzer's taxonomy of windows is (as she acknowledges in her conclusion) provisional, so, in some measure, are all such formal analyses. In her efforts to delineate how windows function as "homing



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devices," however, she wisely directs attention to this pervasive but under-analyzed visual trope. In six of Crockett Johnson's seven Harold books, the title character uses his crayon to draw himself home. The first and last of these—*Harold and the Purple Crayon* (1955) and *Harold's ABC* (1963)—find the protagonist, in the final pages, creating what Schnitzer might call "windows of opportunity" (150), "two stor(e)y/third-space windows" (155), and "distress windows" (147). Near the end of the earlier work, Harold draws houses with windows and then buildings with windows, but "none of the windows was his window." These might be "distress windows": they signify his lack of access to home, and his experience in the "city full of windows" is confining and alien. He finds home only when he remembers that "his bedroom window . . . was always right around the moon." Drawing the window around it with his purple crayon, Harold returns himself home. In the sense that Harold's bedroom window is (in Schnitzer's words) "charged with homemaking/keeping responsibilities," it is a window of opportunity, translating Harold's art "into prospect and sanctuary" (150). In another sense, this same window might be of the two-stor(e)y/third-space variety, because it "draws attention to the fact that the alternative and sometimes competing stories of home are simultaneously present in a single window" (155). Harold lives on the boundaries between imagination and reality. Inasmuch as his crayon-created world is his only reality, we accept the window and bed he draws next as real; inasmuch as these items are mere projections of his mind, we see them as imaginary. He is both really home and only imagining that he is home. Exploring the multivalent meanings of this visual trope reminds one that Johnson's seemingly simple stories are, in fact, rich and complex.

As Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale remind us, historicity offers a

route to such complexity. In their study of “Canadian Aboriginal Picture Books by Aboriginal Authors,” they note that, while picture books lack the “anger and siege mentality” found in most adult Aboriginal fiction, these works for younger readers nonetheless display the sources of that mentality (92). For this reason, they suggest reading these picture books as protest literature, viewing the political conditions that give rise to these stories. In the Radical Children’s Literature course that I am teaching this term, my students and I are exploring how historicizing makes visible (arguably) subversive themes that might otherwise be overlooked. While Alfred Kreyborg and Boris Artzybasheff’s *Funnybone Alley* (1927) may seem largely an exercise in imaginative nonsense, its resonances with movements in progressive education suggest how it also functions as protest literature. When students’ attention wanders in Dr. Isosceles’s class (in the chapter “Long Words and Short Ones”), instead of “demerits,” they receive license “to attempt what the Principal called ‘expressing themselves’” (148). This license to dream affirms the beliefs of the Lyrical Leftists of the 1910s and 1920s, who thought that, as Malcolm Cowley put it, “if a new educational system can be introduced, one by which children are encouraged to develop their own personalities, to blossom freely like flowers, then the world will be saved by this new, free generation” (69). To borrow from Julia Mickenberg’s *Learning from the Left*, viewed

in this context, *Funnybone Alley* supports this belief in “salvation by the child” and “the revolutionary power of education” (26). Like the Aboriginal picture books that Wolf and DePasquale study, this work speaks to the aspirations of those who seek a more just future—but we only perceive these aspirations when we historicize.

Such analysis prompts one type of rereading, but Perry Nodelman’s recursive examination of his own earlier critical judgments prompts another. Having recommended Welwyn Katz’s *False Face* for an award two decades ago, he now considers that decision flawed because he has become “concerned about issues of appropriation—about the questions that arise when writers, artists, anthropologists, museum curators, and others engage with cultures not their own” (108). He quotes Linda Alcoff’s adept observation that “the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for” (qtd. in Reimer 111). Such scholarly reflection and self-criticism resonates with a project inspired by questions about my own claim that Dr. Seuss’s “stereotypes soften or disappear over time”: that caricatures of the Japanese, Africans, and African Americans “vanished from Seuss’s work as times changed and Seuss changed with them” (107). By 1941, Seuss *generally* avoided stereotyping people of African descent, and by the late 1940s,

he usually veered away from caricaturing persons of Asian heritage. In the same period during which he was writing works actively critical of discrimination, however, Seuss also brought us to “the African Island of Yerka,” where we meet two nearly naked, thick-lipped African men who seem to emerge directly from his early cartoons. In that same book—*If I Ran the Zoo* (1950)—Seuss’s protagonist also journeys to “the mountains of Zomba-ma-Tant / With helpers who all wear their eyes at a slant.” Examining the tension between this work and more progressive works from the same period (*Horton Hears a Who!*, *Yertle the Turtle*), the essay-length piece that I am currently writing highlights not only Seuss’s blindness to his own privilege, but also my insufficient self-awareness.

Louise Saldanha’s insightful “White Picket Fences: At Home with Multicultural Children’s Literature in Canada?” is especially adept at making privilege visible. Her claims about Canadian multiculturalism apply equally well to some modes of American multiculturalism. She argues that Canadian multiculturalism “has functioned to neutralize—rather than seriously engage—the cultural and racial diversity it permits to take shape in Canada. In other words, multiculturalism . . . has emerged as a strategy for managing cultural and racial ‘difference’” (130). The notion of “managing” instead of truly engaging helps articulate what A. O. Scott has called the “well-intentioned multiculturalism” of Peter Sís’s *Madlenka*

(2000). As the title character walks around her New York City block, she meets people from around the globe. Though treating so many cultures with a sufficient specificity is (at least) a tall order for any picture book, Sís’s inconsistencies raise questions. He offers more detail for France (home of Mr. Gaston, baker), India (home of Mr. Singh, news agent), Italy (home of Mr. Ciao, ice-cream truck driver), and Germany (home of Mrs. Grimm, storyteller), treating each as its own country. He paints other areas of the world in broader strokes, revealing only that greengrocer Mr. Eduardo is from Latin America and that merchant Mrs. Kham is from Asia. Treating continents as nations muddies the map. As Scott asks, “And what about Mrs. Kham? Is she Vietnamese? Korean? Chinese? These distinctions matter—surely they would matter to her [Madlenka]—and a children’s book that takes its readers on a trip ‘around the world’ would do better to acknowledge them.” What Saldanha’s essay helps clarify (for me) is that, though Sís’s intentions seem noble, *Madlenka* packages diversity instead of unpacking it in its full complexity—something that Sís does much better in his other works, such as *Tibet Through the Red Box* (1998).

If Madlenka’s mobility is (for her) empowering, the trope of the nomad is a more ambivalent one, as Reimer points out in “Homing and Unhoming: The Ideological Work of Canadian Children’s Literature.” Though she focuses on Canadian novels, American



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picture books traverse some of the same ideological territory. Reimer's observation that in "Canadian children's texts, . . . 'home' and 'not-home' are enacted on the same place" (2) can be productively applied to Ruth Krauss and Maurice Sendak's *A Very Special House* (1953) and Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). The earlier book celebrates a boy's creation of "a house for me Me ME," where he can do as he pleases because "NOBODY ever says stop stop stop." Yet, this house is "not a house you'd see— / and it's not in any street / and it's not in any road." The enthusiasm for this special house rests uneasily next to the reality that it does not exist. While Sendak's exuberant illustrations and Krauss's playful text affirm the boy's imaginative creation, the book simultaneously acknowledges the impossibility of such a home. Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* explores more fully the ambivalence of childhood mobility, when Max's room becomes a jungle. As the bedposts become trees and the ceiling a canopy of vines, his bedroom becomes both "home" and "away" simultaneously. Max experiences this journey to the land of the wild things as liberating: the wild things obey him and make him "king of all wild things." Max's personal triumphs notwithstanding, Sendak's illustrations also convey the dangers of being away—the wild things *are* at least twice Max's size and have sharp teeth and claws. Twice in the book, "they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws." To borrow Reimer's words, Max's mobility is "an ambivalent condition" (20). The tale both figures "mobility as an expulsion from home and link[s] it to the perils of life on the streets" and grants Max entry into a position of privilege, where he has greater freedom to shape his destiny (22).

For me, *Home Words* underscores the intellectual freedom in reading scholarship beyond one's area of expertise. Instead

of narrowly reading toward a particular scholarly project, one can enjoy learning for its own sake—the reason, I expect, that many of us pursued higher education in the first place. Reading *Home Words*, I enjoyed being aware of my American otherness as I came across canonical texts that I had not read (Janet Lunn’s *Shadow in Hawthorne Bay*) or histories that I had not learned (that World War I is seen by many Canadians as a nation-making experience). While I have read Robinsonades, I was unaware of the term and had not considered the genre. Though my inability to read French prevented me from reading

the essays by Danielle Thaler and Anne Rusnak, I was interested to learn that the word “home” is difficult to translate into French—as Reimer’s Introduction and Neil Besner’s Afterword both report. Not only is there no place like home (to paraphrase MGM’s Dorothy), but also, as *Home Words* shows, “home” is both common and alien, a concept both clear and contradictory. In asking us to consider the term’s ideological claims and elisions, these essays compel us to take seriously what we usually take for granted, exploring the many meanings on the way home—wherever that may be.

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