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# Shirley, the Bathwater, and Definitions of Children's Literature

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#### Introduction

Each year in a course I teach on children's literature the question 'But what is children's literature?' arises. I must admit, I don't help matters by frequently setting this as a topic. Responses vary: 'Novels for children are shorter,' one will suggest. 'What about Swallows and Amazons - or Watership Down?' queries another. 'More dialogue?' ventures a third. 'What! more than Ivy Compton-Burnett?' ... and so on. However, I have to say that I've always found both their answers, and those of the theorists in this area, less than satisfactory.

Here I want to do two things: first to review the debate, making explicit my reservations - particularly to the recent influential contribution of Barbara Wall<sup>1</sup>; secondly, and more importantly, to query the whole enterprise, suggesting that all the writers in this controversy, whether they argue that children's literature is distinct or not, are really on the same side. However, though this undermines the debate, I think it does so in a productive way, opening up exciting possibilities for the future of 'children's literature'. But let me begin by examining the respective positions of those from either camp: those who argue that

# No Difference

Marcus Crouch<sup>2</sup> and John Rowe Townsend<sup>3</sup> are the most frequently quoted representatives of this position, both arguing that the

there is no difference, as opposed to

those who argue that children's

literature is distinctive.

concept is simply a commercial convenience. As Townsend puts it, a children's book is simply one 'which appears on the children's list of a publisher'. This, however, is simply a case of what we might call, 'passing the book'. If the critic cannot decide, we must ask how the publisher determines to put a book on a particular list: it is surely not a random assignation, to which the critic ingenuously responds; rather, the decision is based on tacit notions of what is appropriate for children. In other words, the notion of a literature suitable for children is seen as something we all know about: it is taken-for-granted knowledge.

Townsend and Crouch are themselves caught up in this discourse at the very same time that they are supposedly refuting it. So, while proclaiming no difference, they simultaneously invoke it. However, it is seen as so natural that it is not questioned in the debate. Thus Townsend, for example, goes on to speak of children's limited 'range of experience' and intolerance for 'long-windedness'4; in other words, he invokes several criteria of difference. Crouch too, almost as an after-thought, adds the 'one additional consideration - accessibility's, thus opening wide the gate to notions of acceptable content, appropriate language, tone of voice, and so on. Elsewhere Townsend goes further, subdividing children's literature in a way reminiscent of publishers' categories. Thus, in Written for Children (not, note, 'Published for Children'), he talks of 'young children's books'6 as

opposed to those which meet the specific 'needs and interests' of adolescents.

So, despite claims of no difference, these writers cannot help but draw on a discourse which almost naturally separates out children and their literature from an adult standard. They are certainly right to point to the practices of publishing houses, but misguided in seeing these in isolation, rather than as part of wider institutional practices that sustain and naturalise particular definitions of children and their literature. These practices include education, family, the state, and, of course, let us not forget the work of literary critics. In all of these, conceptions of children are continually being underwritten.

If there is a continual drawing on common-sense notions of children, which undermines these writers' claims of no difference, we must then ask on what basis they make such claims. The answer, I believe, is 'quality' - a fact which is made explicit at certain points. In other words, good literature is seen to transcend divisions of age, just as it is supposed to transcend class, race and gender. It is in this way that good children's literature is no different from adults' (and, specifically, those adults with what Captain Hook calls 'good form'). I shall explore this quality dimension more extensively below, but first, let us look at what those who argue that there is a difference say.

# DIFFERENCE

Again, I shall take two main critics in this area, who argue that there is a

distinctive literature, or fiction, for children: Myles McDowell and Barbara Wall.

# Myles McDowell

Of those who are explicit about there being a difference, McDowell offers one of the most comprehensive listings, and probably the most widely quoted:

....children's books are generally shorter; they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism which much adult fiction ignores; children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented, plots are of a distinctive order, probability is often disregarded; and one could go on endlessly talking of magic, and fantasy, and simplicity, and adventure.1

While it is easy to list exceptions to McDowell's criteria, as my students do, I want here to concentrate on two more substantive issues: first, McDowell's pressing claim that the differences are 'essential' rather than 'conventional'; secondly, his taken-forgranted presumption of quality.

On the first issue, it is worth noting the vigour with which McDowell attempts to separate children's fiction from that of adults. To sustain 'essential' differences creates all sorts of difficulties for his case,

which a continuum, or progression,

might far more easily accommodate.

Essential' not conventional

Ironically, there seems to be an error in McDowell's key statement, where he claims, 'differences are essential...because children think quantitatively (sic) differently from adults'9. He surely must mean 'qualitatively' here - as endorsed by the rest of his argument, which leans heavily on the work of the stage theorists, Piaget and Kohlberg - and yet this 'error' is repeated in a reprint<sup>10</sup>.

I have criticised this 'stage' approach to children's literature more extensively elsewhere<sup>11</sup>. Here I simply want to point to the explicit 'gold standard' along which development is measured: that of what I referred to above as 'good form', where 'form' might be an acronym for Formally Operational Rational Man - He who is seen to have unimpeded access to the way the world really is. Thus Piaget, Kohlberg and others are seen to stand outside history, viewing the world objectively and dispassionately. Such a move achieves two things. First, they can document the shortfall of others, like women, blacks, and children, who tend to be seen in terms of 'lack', or incompetence; hence McDowell's candid pronouncement that the superior moral and intellectual standpoint is 'perhaps...restricted to presently living generations of 'advanced' countries'12. Secondly, if it follows that the lesser groups cannot appreciate the full complexity of experience, to which the Adult with Good Form is alone privy; for the former, experience must be carefully tailored. Indeed, McDowell sees

this as 'the heart of the difference':

...a good children's book makes complex experience available to its readers; a good adult book draws attention to the inescapable complexity of experience. <sup>13</sup>

However, this whole notion of experiences existing outside the way they are constructed is problematic, I would suggest. The experiences may be incredibly subtle and intricate, as they often are in Henry James, but they are, incluctably, 'Jamesian'. In other words, relating this to my earlier point, children and their experiences cannot be separated, for what defines a child is the sort of experiences it has, and these experiences, in turn, are given shape and meaning precisely through the discourses of education and child development - discourses heavily influenced by the work of Piaget and

In sum, McDowell, and those on whom he draws, posit a pre-existing reality that great writers can access and depict for us. Henry James is particularly interesting in this regard. being instrumental in trying to fashion literature as a serious art form, and, in so doing, displacing its fantastic modes, relegating these to women and children. James saw literature as unsuitable for these groups, as Felicity Hughes puts it, beyond their reach not only because it dealt with facts of life from which such people had to be 'protected', but because it was too difficult. requiring not only maturity but discrimination beyond the reach of all but the highly educated 14. Leavis and others have perpetuated

this view. Thus Leavis excludes Dickens from his 'great tradition' because 'the adult mind doesn't as a rule find in Dickens a challenge', though he is, significantly, seen to be suitable reading for 'parents and children' 15.

Not only do these theorists lay claim to essential differences, but they tend to naturalise, or 'root' their claims in a biological substrate; e.g. Piaget's 'genetic epistemology, and Leavis's 'organic community'. McDowell is no exception, for, besides drawing on Piaget, he uses the analogy of the spectrum to distinguish the fiction of children from that of adults, arguing that 'he is a fool who cannot distinguish the green from the orange'16. Ironically, of course, different cultures have coded colours differently, some running together these very hues!

So, I have queried the whole notion of unmediated experience, arguing that it is always constructed. But although no group has access to experience 'as it really is', more powerful groups have the discursive power to make their versions of experience more persuasive, more naturalistic. Moreover, not only do they define experience, they also define other groups in terms of how far short of this experience they fall. Thus Jill Paton Walsh can claim that the writer for children has the problem of 'making a fully serious adult statement'17 (my emphasis) in a simpler way. In other words, the

adult has the real experience, which is then simplified.

# Quality Control

Not only does McDowell have the adult stand as benchmark, but, as I said above, it is specifically the adult with good form. This becomes most obvious when McDowell claims to pick a children's work 'almost at random' for grounds of comparison with an adult book, then proceeds to contrast Stig of the Dump with Joyce's Ulysses! Clearly, McDowell is not talking about a text that falls within most adults' reading experience. However, he has to make this move if he is to sustain his claim for an 'essential' difference. Were he to look to the greater part of adult fiction, it would no doubt possess too many of the features by which he characterises children's work - i.e. a concentration on dialogue, incident, action, moral schematism, coincidence, formulae, etc. - and he would end up with a continuum.

McDowell is by no means unique in making this move, though, which runs right through the debate about difference. The famous pronouncements are those of Auden and C.S.Lewis, that 'there are good books which are only for adults...but there are no good books which are only for children' 15.

In contrast to the No Difference claimants, who, as we have seen, tacitly underwrite differences even as they speak, the Difference proponents, whilst proclaiming the distinctiveness of children's literature, have no scruples about measuring it on the same scale as the adult, as though the literatures were, indeed, no different. It is thus hardly surprising that there are no good books only for children, given this way of framing the issue.

Yet if children's literature is different, which is the premise of these writers, wouldn't it be more logical to set aside adult-ish things, and devise more apposite criteria? This, in fact, is Mrs Molesworth's stance:

It is not so much a question of taking up one's stand on the lower rungs of the literary ladder, as of standing on another ladder altogether...<sup>19</sup>

At first sight this appears a sensible solution, but it too leads to an impasse. For, although Mrs Molesworth avoids slipping back into using adult terms for comparison, we must ask where her own ladder leads. Clearly, she has constructed childhood as an entirely separate realm - a notion reaching back to Rousseau, and still popular today, as in the Opies' notion of children comprising a separate tribe. What this misses is the fact that, although children can develop and sustain a distinctive culture, the material out of which their culture is fashioned is culled from the world of adults, however reworked and subverted. Indeed, children can be seen as the ultimate trangressors, appropriating, imitating and subverting adult ways, but in that very process, aspiring to

become, in Kenneth Grahame's term, dreaded Olympians - those who occupy the upper rungs of the ladder. But before taking these issues further, let us consider Barbara Wall's recent answer to this problematic.

# Barbara Wall and the Narrative Voice.

Barbara Wall makes the latest, most articulate contribution to the 'difference' debate. She specifically takes issue with Peter Hunt's criticism of much children's fiction, that it is too much controlled by adults who effectively talk down to children. Wall argues that children have every right to be addressed in such a way - i.e. as children - for that is what they are. In fact she makes this relationship, of narrator to narratee, 'the defining characteristic of children's fiction'<sup>20</sup>.

If a story is written to children, then it is for children, even though it may also be for adults. If a story is not written to children, then it does not form part of the genre writing for children, even if the author, or publisher, hopes it will appeal to children. 11

'Written for Children' is, as I remarked above, the title of Townsend's popular history of children's literature, although, as we have seen, he only finds the category a publisher's device. Wall, on the other hand, clearly believes that her method allows the critic to determine, empirically, whether or not a book is part of children's fiction. Wall's close readings, informed by developments in narrative theory, are

exemplary, but I do not think she has solved the issue in the way she believes.

She starts by dismissing McDowell's solution, claiming that it is not what is said, but how, that determines a children's book 22. This for her, is the one essential. Her analogy for this approach is instructive. She likens it to overhearing someone talking in an adjacent room: from the tone, she says, one could tell whether that person were adult or child. However, there are two observations to make here. First, one would want to stress the obvious danger of likening oral to written discourse - a danger heightened in the case of literary texts. Secondly, even if we accept her analogy, it contains some significant but unexplored dimensions; for it is not only tone that tends to be modified in adult/child discourse; so too is content, syntax, and vocabulary. Thus what is said is still important despite Wall's disclaimer - and she frequently draws on these other elements to make her case. In other words, as with Crouch, Townsend and McDowell, Wall also draws on common sense knowledge of what children are, little realising how it compromises her arguments.

This lack of attention to the historical location of the notion of the child seems a particularly significant omission in Wall's case - especially as her key theme is the development in the last century of what she calls the 'single address' in children's writing. Prior to this, 'double address' - that is, addressing both adults and children - was customary,

because writers did not then 'have the tone of voice to speak to children'. This suggests that 'the skills, interests and frame of reference of children' are constants that adults have only recently come to comprehend, rather than things that have been constructed differently at different times (and extensively developed fairly recently - through the discursive practices of such institutions as education, welfare and publishing, themselves informed by developmental theories like those of Piaget).

To presume, therefore, that a writer speaks directly to a child, is to have already presaged a notion of the child with the specific qualities that this voice meets - i.e. one who understands certain concepts, has a certain vocabulary, uses particular idioms, and has specific interests. Rather than this notion of the child existing independently of these discourses, I have argued that the discourses cannot be dissociated from how the child is constituted in the first place. Or, to look at it from a more familiar angle, the child who responds to a particular text does not need to have all the concepts, vocabulary, and interests already in place: the text may be instrumental in their development, in accommodating particular subject positions.

Children are effectively marginalised in Wall's book. They are the object rather than the subject of discourse. Instead of actual children, we have an abstract and idealised 'implied reader', which frees Wall to speak of 'children's fiction' as a branch of 'LitCrit', as a genre. (There is, of

course, no genre 'adult fiction', though, significantly, much effort has gone into making a ghetto of 'women's writing'.) In this scenario children become supernumerary - as endorsed by other critics (e.g. Brian Alderson in his comment on 'the irrelevance of children to the children's book reviewer'25, or Inglis's pronouncement that 'Tom's Midnight Garden and Puck of Pook's Hill are wonderful books whoever you are, and that judgement stands whether or not your child can make head or tail of them'26.

Real children muddy this picture. And yet, the child reader is still necessary to underpin the appropriation. Interestingly, Wall makes only one reference to an actual child reader, to support her assertion that Alice is a children's book, contra a remark by Dahl that it is really for adults. Here Wall draws on the positive testimony of Greville, George MacDonald's son, and Alice's first child reader™. But elsewhere children are relegated. Wall does this by distinguishing 'children's fiction' from the more nebulous term 'children's literature'; the latter she considers 'incapable of definition', in that it might include anything from Gulliver's Travels to The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, 'if children wish to, or can be persuaded to, read them'28. With Greville in mind, it is salutary to note a recent British survey in which children voted Adrian Mole one of their favourites (based on school bookshop sales), though it went unmentioned by the simultaneously

polled adult critics.<sup>29</sup> If we take a child reader like Greville seriously, as Wall does this once, then why should we not do so elsewhere, with other child readers?

The child's voice is also underplayed in Wall's model of the narrative process, which has six components leading from author to reader, via implied author/reader. and narrator/narratee. The whole progression is indicated by arrows, which are tellingly one-way. There are none being fired back, showing how child readers, in the manner of Greville, might respond. In Bakhtin's terms, the model is monological (as is Wall's analogy of the dyadic conversation) rather than dialogical 30; in my experience, however, children frequently read against the authorial grain, wittingly or otherwise. So, although Mrs Sherwood might write The History of the Fairchild Family to make all children obedient and God-fearing, readers, like Lord Frederick Hamilton, might find other pleasures therein:

I liked the book notwithstanding. There was plenty about eating and drinking; one could always skip the prayers and there were three or four very brightly written accounts of funerals in it. 31

Children, in other words, will not necessarily accept their dedicated address. Like Lord Hamilton above, children may read their literature 'slant', they may even, like Harriet the Spy<sup>32</sup> deliberately eavesdrop on that which is not intended for them.

There is, then, no distinctive language, no way of talking that is 'just for children' - any more than there is for other groups - though there are frequent attempts to impose a particular voice (e.g. blacks addressed as 'Uncle Toms'; women as 'angels in the house').

Language, as said above, is not monological in this way; rather, the sign is multi-accented, which means that, even in the simple act of listening, one must still produce a set of 'answering words' in order to make sense:

the word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.<sup>33</sup>

Examples of 'other' children's voices can be hard to find, because of the overarching paradigm. However, they are there. For example, a recent work by Cohen and MacKeith looking at children's own literary creations reveals them inventing secondary worlds which frequently feature whole societies, with their own political and economic systems, communication networks, and military forces.34 Or Carolyn Steedman's transcription of a story by three eight-year old girls is also revealing in its candid depiction of poverty and sexuality.35 Then there is the growing literature on children's

nargatives in other cultures, where examples of more rugged, open-ended, violent, sexually explicit, and not necessarily happily-ending tales occur. In fact, it is interesting that the happy ending, one of McDowell's essential features, is singularly lacking in early children's literature (i.e. in the popular 'cautionary' tale), as it is in many nursery rhymes and folk tales.

The above should not, of course, be thought of as a move to uncover some 'real', more primal, childhood ('little devils' rather than 'holy innocents') but simply to point to the diversity, the different ways children and their narratives are constructed. Nor should it be thought that children are only constructions, as some writers seem to suggest. Clearly, they are embodied beings, with their own cultural repertoires, which exist in a dialectical relationship to adult culture, frequently reworking, subverting, and appropriating adult meanings.

To bring this involved section together, let me reiterate the main points. I am suggesting that Wall ducks a key issue. She presumes a particular notion of childhood which she takes as a constant, and proceeds to nail her definitional colours to this mast. The genre 'children's fiction' is seen to exist to the extent that it meets this particular conception, regardless of children's actual reading practices. In contrast, I have suggested that it is the constant that is fictional; that our conception of the child is historically situated, and often class and gender inflected; moreover, that we construct a childwho-has-certain-experiences, to which children will differentially relate. Thus, it is not enough to consider the narrative voice, we must also consider the response of the child to this voice. We must, in short, give voice to the child.

# DIFFERANCE

What I hope has emerged from the above is that, although critics may argue over whether children's literature37 is different from adults', and if so in what ways, they all speak of a remarkably uniform child, albeit in the absence of any specific child. Just as particular versions of the child are constructed by children's authors, so too do critics celebrate and recycle similar versions. This is not, of course, peculiar to children's literature. Any powerful group inevitably promulgates its version of the world, and its discourses - or stories - tend to speak more loudly than others. We have seen this in the case of women, blacks, gays and others, where fairly recent struggles to assert an independent voice have occurred. Children, however, are a more problematic category, as suggested in connection with Mrs Molesworth's alternative ladder; for whereas those of a particular gender or ethnicity do not generally change, children do: they metamorphose into their opposites. Children may be metaphors of innocence, but they are also, disturbingly, metonyms of adulthood, of experience.

To capture the problematic

expressed above, I have chosen Derrida's deliberately slippery term 'differance' 38. Like 'brillig' and 'slithy', 'differance' is a portmanteau word, bringing together notions of 'difference' and 'deferral'. It captures many of the facets explored above, but does so without suggesting any simplistic resolution.

First. I have stressed that there is always difference, but it is never complete; it is always in process, for notions of children change across time, gender, race and class. Also, each child changes over time, playing at adulthood in various guises. The last point about difference is that it depends on 'the other'. The adult standard can only exist when set apart from that which is not; in this way it secures its identity. So, the 'great tradition' is bolstered by 'lesser traditions' (Fred Inglis actually compiles a 'lesser great tradition') which are, thereby, deficient. Second, difference contains the notion of deferral, for it is not 'adulthood' per se on which difference is constructed, but the Adult with Good Form; Joyce, remember not Zane Grey, Agatha Christie, or Barbara Cartland - was chosen by McDowell as his representative writer. One's ability to evaluate texts must therefore be deferred until one reaches this elevated status, and most, of course, never do. Children, by definition, can never be reliable judges, and neither can many adults. Indeed, Frank Whitehead

counsels that even a teacher might be ineligible, 'unless he has succeeded in arranging all literary works he knows, both past and present, in a hierarchical order of value'.<sup>19</sup>

The biggest deferral, however, is in consulting the child: despite continued reference to children, there is a reluctance, if not a refusal, to bring them in. Even getting close to them as an author is dubious. Thus Wall criticises those who bridge this gap by 'climbing down alongside the child obstrusively (sic) using his idiom, or shouting for his attention'.40 I find this a strange declaration, not least in Wall's uncharacteristic use of the masculine pronoun; elsewhere she has voiced approval of writers who 'talk down' to children (criticising Hunt for demurring on this point), but 'climbing down' is clearly of a different order. The adult is expected to keep a distance, so as not to compromise any critical stance: 'The challenge is a stiff one: to adjust language, concepts and tone to the understanding of the child without loss of meaning, significance or dignity'41 (though Wall seeks to distance herself from McDowell, they are very close on this).

So, although the work is for children, it must not be child-ish. One can talk down, as from those upper rungs, but one must not climb down. The adult must remain distinct, and in control of the constructed child. As Derrida puts it, differance 'is read, or it is

written but it cannot be heard'.42 This seems also the fate of children in their literature: to be seen and not heard; to be inscribed within but not heard upon. Jacqueline Rose's pronouncement on this is often quoted, that 'there is no child behind the category 'children's fiction', other than the one which the category itself sets in place'.43 However, though right in principle, her discourse is guilty of the same practice; that is, speaking for children, thus being party to their marginalisation. We need not throw out the child with the bathwater' in this way, I would suggest. In fact, to pursue this analogy, I would suggest that John Burningham's Shirley indicates how we might explore the child in situ (bath-wise) to good effect.44

In Burningham's story we are given, on opposite sides of a twopage spread, both a mundane description of bath-time through the symbolic world of print, and a more fantastic pictorial account of that same time, as Shirley journeys down, - not a rabbit but a plug-hole. Shirley, it should be said, is only distantly aware of the textual constraints that her parents strive to impose on her. This juxtaposition neatly captures my own experience in exploring children's use of texts: they are rarely constrained by the printed word, seeking to fashion some coherent, verbal icon; rather, they want to appropriate and manipulate the elements that appeal, fashioning a space for their fantasies.

Elsewhere I have called such elements 'discursive threads'45; in other words, parts of the textual weave that readers enjoy unpicking and spinning into their own, more personalised yarns. It seems to me that this concept offers a way forward: rather than have a 'children's literature' which begins with preset notions of what constitutes 'literature' and 'children', I suggest we start with the children and explore what they like to read. We might then be able to accommodate those many reading histories that currently do not fit, like the 9 year old Beryl Bainbridge, 'reading Just William, What Katy Did, The Mill on the Floss and Enid Blyton'46, or, Alison Hennegan, also reading Blyton, but alongside Dostoevsky47. Or the many adults who confess to enjoying school and adventure stories. The notion of discursive threads helps foster this more inductive approach, trying to tease out the particular elements that appeal.

# CONCLUSION

I have suggested that those on either side of the debate about children's literature being different, are, effectively, on the same side. Those who argue for no difference almost unconsciously underwrite difference, though they hide its sources; whilst those who argue for difference then proceed to measure the two literatures using the same adult yardstick. Sure enough, children's literature is usually found wanting. I have

also suggested that we simply go round reinscribing circles here, as if at some mad tea-party; although it no longer seems acceptable to keep shouting 'No room! No room!' indulging our appetites while the key party - the main topic of conversation - remains uninvited.

To escape this repetitive circling, where places change but things remain the same, we need to start afresh. We need to look at the actual reading practices of children. Given adult control over the child's world, some might see this as doomed from the start: we can surely never discover in any unsullied way what children really think! But this is misguided, being premised on the notion that childhood is indeed a separate realm, whereas children are only too aware of the massive presence of adults in their world. Hence their inveterate pragmatism, their distinctive culture being an intertextual refashioning of the adult world. This is why the term 'differance' was chosen, in that it captures the dynamic tension around child and adult whilst escaping the false polarisation of difference.

Most excitingly, I think, by embracing differance, we have the opportunity to explore these often taboo border regions: the borrowings, transgressions and looking-glass inversions that each side engages in, in what Voloshinov termed 'the struggle over the sign'. Not only can we explore why certain discursive threads appeal to children, whether they be in The Magic Faraway Tree, Gulliver's Travels or The Mill on the Floss, but we

can also, on the same basis, examine why we continue to enjoy certain child-ish texts, whether Just William, Winnie-the-Pooh or Where the Wild Things Are. Ironically, I am suggesting that it is only if we, the selfish giants, knock down the walls that immure children's literature - only then can we, perhaps, come to know children's literature fruitfully.

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