

Recent trends in children's literature research:

Return to the body

Thirty plus years ago, when I was an emerging scholar in the field of Children's Literature Studies, it was possible to feel in command of most key works and avenues of research. Since then the subject has evolved and expanded to such an extent that no single person today has a full command of what is going on; no one can read all the new books and articles in the rapidly mushrooming journals; no one can attend even a fraction of conferences. Any overview of current research is inevitably selective (see e.g. Pinsent 2016). The paper on which this article is based therefore focused on a few areas that I find particularly promising. I will attempt to synthesise some prominent trends and explore common features that may – or may not – tell us about whence today's scholarship has come and whither it is heading.

In *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992), John Stephens claimed that children's literature research lacked a discourse of its own and therefore borrowed extensively from other areas. I disagreed then and disagree now. Children's literature has certainly borrowed like a thieving magpie from other areas, just as all other areas have borrowed from each other. Yet children's literature doubtless has its own discourse that grapples with the issues of what children literature is and what it does, issues specific to this kind of literature. It does this in ways similar to how, for example, scholars of women's literature or working-class literature try to understand why their particular kinds of literature came to be and what they have done to and for authors, characters, readers and markets. We are still trying to address these questions (e.g. Jones 2006; Nodelman 2008; Gubar 2011; Beauvais 2015).

Until relatively recently, children's literature research was predominantly inspired by cultural theory, viewing the child and childhood as a social construction rather than a material body existing in a material world (see e.g. Lesnik-Oberstein 1994; Clarke 2003; Horne 2011; Gavin 2012). Gender, race, class, sexual orientation, family structures, power hierarchies – everything was in the mind of the beholder, a spectre imposed by society and its ideologies. Evolutionary historians call these structures imagined orders (Harari 2011, 102-118), as opposed to natural orders, dictated by biology. The real child was irretrievably lost in imagined orders, and children's literature became a field for ideological battles (Hollindale 1988; Stephens 1992; Zornado 2001).

However, gradually a tangible change in the attitude occurred, referred to as the material turn. Suddenly colleagues and students are working on new topics such as ecocriticism (Dobrin and Kidd 2004; Curry 2013), place-related identities (Cutter-Mackenzie et al. 2011), animal studies

(Jaques 2015), disability studies (Keith 2001; Avelyn 2009) and cognitive poetics (Stephens 2011; Kümmerling-Meibauer 2012; Trites 2014). They explore maps in children's literature (Pavlik 2010), the physicality of landscape (Carroll 2012), objects and artefacts, including dollhouses (Chen 2015) and fashion (Vaclavik 2014); on hidden economies, on corporal punishment and assisted suicide, just to give a few examples. The common denominator of many new crossdisciplinary fields is their focus on materiality. However, this conspicuous trend does not simply take us back to essentialism, but reflects the complexity, plurality and ambiguity of our understanding of childhood and its representation in fiction produced and marketed for young audiences. These recent studies explore in more detail the complex relationship between perceptible phenomena and their representations in children's fiction; between the physical body and its immaterial, linguistic fictional portrayal; between physical and fictional place; between human identity and the enigmatic, non-existing identity of fictional characters made exclusively of words.

My own research in the past five years has been focused on exploring the potential of cognitive literary theory (Nikolajeva 2014), a rapidly expanding area that I find utterly fascinating (see Trites 2014; Crago 2014, Oziewicz 2015, just to mention a few book-length publications). Cognitive criticism is, as Peter Stockwell claims, 'a way of *thinking* about literature' (Stockwell 2002, 6; original emphasis), and it has indeed significantly affected my own thinking about literature, not least about the material turn. Contrary to what might be the assumption, cognitive criticism is not solely concerned with consciousness; instead it interrogates the previously dominant separation of body and mind. In turn, posthuman theories question the conventional definition of the body, extending it to include biological and technological augmentation and subsequently asking where the boundaries should be drawn (Waller 2011; Allan 2013; Flanagan 2014; Jaques 2015). The 'post' in posthuman obviously reflects the interrogation of humanism as a philosophy and ideology that gives supremacy to the human being over all other organisms and things, either as individuals or as a species. For literary studies, the humanist approaches support obsession with human fictional characters. As E.M. Forster claims in his classic work *Aspects of the Novel*, 'actors in a story are usually human ... Other animals have been introduced, but with limited success, for we know too little so far about their psychology' (Forster 2005, 43). Forster was evidently ignorant of the abundance of non-human characters in children's literature; but his statement reflects the common view that only humans with their actions, thoughts, feelings and concerns, are appropriate objects of attention in fiction.

Posthuman theories, firstly, shift the focus to include non-human beings, and secondly, explore humans in connection with these non-human beings, as well as with natural and man-made environments. In children's literature, the issues are less surprising since non-human bodies have been ever prominent, which goes back to the animistic beliefs of our distance ancestors, when they

70,000 years ago started telling fictional stories (see e.g. Boyd 2010; Gottschall 2012). We know very little from the infinitesimally few surviving artefacts, but it is safe to assume that in their stories, early Homo Sapiens endowed animals, landscape features and weather phenomena with sentience and thus emotions and intentions (Harari 2011, 54-5). This has its clear traces in children's stories long after humans as a species moved on first to polytheism and further to monotheism; and long after the left cerebral hemisphere became dominant and initiated the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth century (see Damasio 2006; McGilchrist 2008). Children's books abound in creatures of whom we have no physical experience, and the existence of whom a scientist would doubt until proved empirically, such as dwarfs, fairies, dragons, giants and Borrowers. Not only do these characters frequently have grotesque bodies, including the hybrid human-animal bodies of centaurs and mermaids, but these bodies can be augmented magically, just as the cyborg body can be augmented biologically or technologically. Some of these magical bodies have power over weather, some can shape-shift – another hybrid embodiment – or make other creatures change shape; some are so strong that they can lift a horse; some can fly, defying natural laws; some can even die and be resurrected. Further, an overwhelming number of children's stories feature anthropomorphic animals, animated toys and other objects (Kuznets 1994; Coslett 2006). This fact cannot be simply explained, as is sometimes done, by the fact that 'children like animals' or 'children like playing with toys'. There are good cognitive reasons for the omnipresence of animals and animated objects in children's literature, while these are rare in literature targeting mature audiences. Among other things, as cognitive criticism maintains, anthropomorphising is the learning brain's strategy to make sense of the world (e.g. Vermeule 2010, 21-2).

Early studies of animals, toys and machines, including Joseph Schwarcz's insightful article 'Machine Animism in Modern Children's Literature' (1967), were primarily human-centred. Apart from pure nature stories, few texts discussed in these studies used the animal's, toy's or machine's perspective; these were most often the child protagonist's companions. As such, they were frequently interpreted as imaginary friends, as in the case of Karlsson-on-the-roof (Lindgren 1975), a human/machine hybrid with a propeller on his back. Even in nature stories, animals would be endowed with human minds, sometimes with speech; oftentimes different species would co-exist and communicate in a way contradictory to the natural order. Almost invariably, when texts featured animal/toy/machine protagonists, these were interpreted as representing children (e.g. Blount 1974). Such interpretation lies in line with constructivist approaches to childhood. A non-human body is of little interest; therefore an animal, toy or machine inevitably has to be a child in disguise.

Posthuman studies, in particular animal studies, promote looking at fictional animals as animals, and both delineate and question the human body as opposed to the non-human body (Berger 2009). However, long before the emergence of animal studies, Carole Scott highlighted the

fascinating moment in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* when Peter, escaping from Mr McGregor, loses his blue jacket and runs on all four, blurring the boundary between a natural and anthropomorphic animal (Scott 1992). Many scholars have also pointed to the reverse transformation in *Babar*, when the elephant dons human clothes and starts walking on hind legs. Walking upright does to a certain degree define a human being, and animals in the natural environment do not wear clothes.

Negotiations within the hybrid human/animal or human/machine body are omnipresent in real life, but in fiction they can be amplified; and in children's fiction they can be used for didactic purposes, in the positive sense: to draw readers' attention to a puzzling inconsistency. The examples of *Babar* and *Peter Rabbit* are illuminating. The implied author of *Babar* seems to claim that humans are superior to animals. Therefore, the objective of the uncivilised animal – presumably representing a child – is to abandon his animality and become a human. *Peter Rabbit*, in contrast, starts as an anthropomorphic animal, displaying human features, such as walking upright and wearing a blue jacket, but loses them when facing danger. Admittedly, the change is only temporary, since at the end he is subjected to a typically human punishment of being sent to bed without supper. And yet the crucial moment of transformation disrupts the construction of this character as merely a representation of a child.

Nowhere are the dilemmas of the hybrid as tangible as in animal groom myths and fairy tales which, for inexplicable reasons, have been transposed into the domain of children's literature. (Because children like animals? Because children's bodies are not fully human, therefore children can relate to non-human hybrids?) Stories such as *Beauty and the Beast* or *The Frog King* as we know them, often through child-friendly adaptations, promptly suggest that the human body is preferable. Contemporary deconstructions of such stories may create a humorous effect when a human decides to become animal rather than to encourage the animal partner to turn human. But this pattern is by no means new. The well-known story of the little mermaid, even in its un-Disneyfied version as retold by Hans Christian Andersen, purports that the mermaid's objective is to become human, for whatever reasons. In Andersen's version, the reason is spiritual, in the Disney version, romantic. However, the story has ancient roots, and it can feature mermaids, selkies, trolls, dragons and other kinds of hybrid bodies, both male and female. In the story, humans face a choice. Since they cannot unite with the object of their desire, they need to give up either the object or their own human form. Surprisingly often, the human chooses the latter option, not merely in myths and fairy tales, but also in a contemporary novel such as *Twilight* (Meyer 2007). We may believe that Bella's choice is wrong, but the fact remains that a fictional human has a choice of giving up being human rather than forcing non-humans to abandon their non-human features. *Shrek* (2001) is another example where we seem to feel much more comfortable with the character's choice. Is *Shrek* more appealing as a spouse than Edward Cullen?

In stories that we more closely associate with childhood than the stories of desire for a non-human partner, the objective of toy characters is frequently to become 'real'. Note the adjective: Pinocchio (Collodi 1996) wishes to become a real boy; the Velveteen Rabbit (Williams 2007) wants to become real. Yet becoming real, or human, makes being real or being human a norm. All such stories, wonderful as they are, confirm that being real is equal to being human, which is an anthropocentric belief that posthuman studies strongly interrogate. If the toy, in accordance with the constructivist approach, is a representation of the child, becoming real is a metaphor of growing up, which in itself is problematic since it stipulates adulthood as a norm and childhood as an abnormal state to be left behind. In my book *Power, Voice and Subjectivity*, I refer to this belief as aetonnormativity (Nikolajeva 2010).

However, if we abandon constructivism and search for instances of the opposite, we find striking examples of literature pre-dating posthumanist philosophy by decades. Posthumanism has made us aware of the issues of the hybrid, yet the issues themselves have existed in children's literature for ages. Another Italian children's novel, *The Adventures of Chiodino* (Parca and Argilli 1994), is a dialogical reply to *Pinocchio*. Unlike Pinocchio, who is made from a piece of wood, Chiodino, whose name means 'a little screw', is made from scrap metal and is thus a machine rather than a puppet. Unlike Pinocchio, Chiodino does not transform into a real boy at the end of his adventures; neither does he have a wish to. Instead, his machine body notwithstanding, he displays human features far beyond those portrayed as typical of his human adversaries: empathy, loyalty, altruism. Chiodino is thus a stable hybrid of a technological body and a human mind. In *The Mouse and His Child* (Hoban 1967), the toy characters do not wish to become humans, or real mice; they wish to become self-winding, that is, keep their identity, but acquire agency. Again, it is easy to interpret this wish as a metaphor for growing up; yet there is something disturbing about a mechanical boy remaining mechanical and toys remaining toys. These stories disrupt our expected scripts. And that, I presume, is their intention.

Becoming human is not necessarily the best solution for an animal, toy or machine. Moreover, a human transformed into a non-human may or may not want to return to the human form. Eustace, in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Lewis 1952), is transformed into a dragon. In his dragon body, he retains his human mind and feels utterly uncomfortable. Interestingly, for C. S. Lewis, who gives the divine authority animal shape, allowing a human child to remain a dragon is not an option; while in *Tehanu* (LeGuin 1990) a human/dragon hybridity defines the protagonist. Sandra, in *Lady: My Life as a Bitch* (Burgess 2002), discovers that animal form offers her agency that she can never attain as a human. This should be disturbing; but then being human is in itself disturbing.

What, then, makes a human body decisively human? Some scholars would say, language;

but we have already seen how easily children's literature circumvents this issue, endowing hybrid bodies with the ability to communicate through language, both with humans and between themselves. Many scholars would claim that consciousness is a unique characteristic of human beings. Yet what exactly does it mean to be sentient and how does children's literature deal with it? Simple anthropomorphism is not enough, since, while it endows animals and objects with the ability to walk and talk, these traits are necessary, but not sufficient for what we typically recognise as sentience. The various definitions of consciousness emphasise the awareness of being sentient (see e.g. Blackmore 2005). With the assumption that animals and objects in children's literature are children in disguise, we do not contemplate whether these animals and objects show awareness of being animals and objects. Does the *Lost Thing* (Tan 2000) know that it is a *Lost Thing*? Do we know? And how do we know?

On 7 July 2012, a group of international scholars adopted *The Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness*, stating that all animals are sentient (see e.g. Bekoff 2012). More recently, a chimpanzee was acknowledged as a legal subject, and consequently as possessing personhood. While these are welcome actions for animal rights, the inclusion seems to me just as problematic as exclusion. If all animals, down to the smallest monocyte, are sentient, how do we deal with plants? In a recent book, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (Mancuso and Viola 2015), the authors claim that if intelligence is defined as the ability to solve problems, plants are intelligent since they are very good at problem-solving. *The Lie Tree* (Hardinge 2015) portrays a plant that obviously possesses consciousness. If plants are sentient, then are stones sentient? Is water sentient? Are hybrid bodies sentient? Are machines sentient? Can a machine pass the Turing test? What if it does? In fiction, machines have done it repeatedly. So have animals. So have superhuman creatures. Neuroscience rejects dualism, the separation of body and mind, making the mind just as material as the body. One children's novel illustrates this brilliantly: *His Dark Materials* (Pullman 1995). In Lyra's world, humans are incomplete without their physical consciousness. Remember Will's astonishment in *The Subtle Knife* (Pullman 1997) when his mind materialises.

Emotions are another characteristic associated with human beings. While we can speculate about animals' feelings, we can never know for sure, as Jenny Diski admits in the title of her insightful book, *What I Don't Know about Animals* (2010). Children's literature is problematic, either oversimplifying purported non-human emotions, or ascribing human emotions to non-human beings, or both. Children's picturebooks show images of smiling animals, for instance, *Curious George* (Rey 1941) who, as the text asserts, was a very happy monkey. In fact, animals do not smile; when monkeys bare their teeth, it is a sign of aggression. In scores of children's books, non-human characters are portrayed as capable of romantic love. True, we know that some species mate

for life, but it does not follow that they are capable of romantic love. Are non-human bodies capable of other higher-cognitive emotions, such as guilt, jealousy, pride? The answer is, we do not know. But through fiction, and equipped with posthuman ways of reasoning, we may try to understand. It helps to know that emotions are not abstract, ethereal somethings; they are firmly embodied and can, perhaps, be read through observing bodies.

Denying non-humans the ability to suffer has caused unimaginable cruelty. Yet does suffering presuppose awareness of suffering? The mechanical boy Chiodino should logically not be able to feel pain. In an episode in the book, he is displayed by an evil human in a freak show, with a chain around his neck. In the audience he sees his maker, whom he calls his father. Father and son try to reach each other in despair. The showmaster tries to persuade the audience that Chiodino is a machine and therefore incapable of suffering, yet the audience sides with father and son, perceiving the boy as a sentient being, a person. One of the most poignant portrayals of suffering I have ever read was in *Wild Animals I Have Known* (Seton 1966). These animals are not children in disguise.

Representation of suffering appeals to empathy, and empathy, the ability to understand others' feelings independently of one's own, is also identified as human-specific (see e.g. Keen 2007). Children's literature abounds in non-human characters displaying empathy. *Charlotte's Web* (White 1952) comes to mind; but is Charlotte really a spider? A real spider would not feel empathy for a pig. There are scores of other examples, and in many cases the emergence of empathy becomes a turning point in the story. Yet this does not bring us closer to the question of whether animals and machines can empathise. Numerous recent studies show that mammals and birds have the capacity to empathise not only with their own, but even with other species.

Contemporary science fiction and dystopia bring new dimensions into the human/non-human dilemma. I am not in the first place thinking of the cyborg as a biologically and technologically augmented or manipulated body, although this is a highly fascinating subject that several scholars have investigated (Flanagan 2014; Shakeshaft 2014). My interest lies in memory manipulation and the ways in which it affects identity. Memory is ostensibly another unique characteristic of human beings (Schacter 1997; Foster 2009). In a dualistic worldview, that distinguishes between body and mind, memory, like consciousness, is immaterial. Contemporary brain research demonstrates that memory is an activity governed by chemical and electric processes in the brain; in other words, memory is embodied; it is just as substantial and material as sight or hearing. What happens, then, if, in a dystopian world, an individual or a whole community is deprived of memory; if memory is altered, distorted; if a new set of memories is implanted? If memory is a crucial part of personhood, is a body with limited or false memory still a person? And what happens to the body if deleted memory is recovered? In many dystopias involving this issue the solution seems to be the recovery of the initial set of memories and the initial identity. Yet is it

ever possible? Isn't hybridisation irreversible?

The attraction of genres such as fantasy, science fiction and dystopia, for writers as well as readers, is the wide scope for thought experiments where the boundaries can be stretched as far as imagination allows. There is, however, a worry. Much of the technological development presented in dystopian and science fiction as grotesque bodies is or soon will be a reality. It is technically possible to alter a person's memory; it is possible to use remote control for life-supporting medication. Recent biomedical research claims that it is possible to make humans a-mortal – not immortal, because they could still be killed in road accidents or through crime – but a-mortal in the sense of impeding ageing for ever. In fiction, including children's fiction, the search for immortality has been always reserved for villains, with good reasons. Being mortal is a part of being human, just as being born rather than manufactured is a part of being human; just as procreation rather than cloning is a part of being human. A wish for immortality is a wish to transcend the limitation of the human body. Would an a-mortal body still be human? Or would it be a biological machine? Bioethics deals with these issues in real life. Speculative fiction allows us to contemplate these questions in amplified form, even though the real-life development toward infinite augmentation is apparently irreversible.

However, it would be wrong to assume that the issue of the grotesque body is limited to non-mimetic modes, such as fantasy, science fiction, dystopia or paranormal romance. Non-mimetic fiction certainly allows broader speculation, taking grotesque bodies beyond the boundary of our perception and experience. However, realistic fiction has its own ways of highlighting materiality, and, again, recent theories offer adequate tools to explore it. I prefer to refer to alterity studies as an umbrella for various theories including theories of gender, race, multiculturalism and physical and mental health. Alterity studies are moving beyond constructivism, focusing on physical facts rather than constructed phenomena. For instance, disability studies cannot treat disability exclusively as a social construction (see Hall 2015).

Similarly to posthumanism, alterity theories investigate boundaries between physical and social phenomena that once used to be viewed as clearcut binaries. Firstly, there are liminal zones, and as we know, liminal zones are the most active, where negotiations happen, where borders are in flux. More important, perhaps, alterity theories operate with the concepts of inclusion and exclusion that help us understand how boundaries are created and maintained, and how they develop and change. To go back to our pre-historic ancestors, the division between 'us' and 'them' is biologically conditioned, and it occurs among non-human animals as well, both between species and within species. The binary is, therefore, so firmly rooted in human brains that it is only through culture, through imagined orders, that they can be counterbalanced. The physicality, or the morphology of the body, including shape, colour, movement, habitat, food preferences, was once the only way

humans could distinguish between us and them. Physical deviation has traditionally been viewed as abnormality, be it anatomy, skin or hair colour, or disfigurement. In ancient societies, deviations were or were not accepted to various degrees. Disfigured infants, for instance, were frequently killed at birth.

Conventional solutions of alterity issues were either to eliminate the Other or incorporate it into Own. Speaking extremely cynically, but with support from evolutionary studies, a disabled body is a liability for a community or a broader society. A sick or disabled body was perceived as abnormal and therefore a social problem to be addressed. It is illuminating how physical disability was represented in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children's literature (see Keith 2001; Avelin 2009; Dunn 2015). Great numbers of sick children, main and peripheral characters alike, were conveniently allowed to die. There were, of course, several reasons for this, all thoroughly investigated, such as Christian beliefs in the purity of the child - spectacularly incompatible with the concept of original sin. There is, however, another sickness script that we find in children's stories: *Heidi* (Spyri 1995), *What Katy Did* (Coolidge 1997), *Pollyanna* (Porter 1994), *The Secret Garden* (Burnett 1995) – a child miraculously cured, often through a beneficial influence of another child. As with young dead martyrs, this script is firmly rooted in Christian belief, whether or not this is made explicit. Moreover, both scripts are dictated by the narratological demand of completeness: as an abnormality, a sick body must either be eliminated or repaired. There is a shift from death to recuperation by the end of the nineteenth century when a child's death was no longer perceived as a happy ending.

Drawing a parallel with animal studies, disability literary studies explore whether disability is represented as something that the disabled themselves, or other people around them, or both, perceive as abnormal and wish to get rid of, or whether disability is treated as a part of personhood that can and should be respected. Disability studies focus on identity, agency and choice, on in-group and out-group perspectives, on inclusion and exclusion. These concepts are more complex than it may seem. One might assume that inclusion is always preferable, but this is far from self-evident. A disabled person may feel excluded from a particular community, but a disabled community can also exclude able-bodied people. Many children's books follow this script.

Laureth, the visually impaired protagonist of *She is Not Invisible* (Sedgwick 2013), is frequently asked whether she would like to be able to see, and she explains that she has no experience of being able to see and therefore has no idea whether she desires it or not. This is a good example of what disability studies emphasise as an appropriate way of addressing disability. Disability is not a deviation from the norm, it is not the opposite of able-bodiedness. It is one of many possible human conditions that constitute personhood. Laureth can do almost anything a sighted person can, and she can do more than an average able-bodied person can. Visual impairment is a

part of her identity in the same way as her gender, class, education and food preferences. She does not ask for privileges based on her disability; she just resents being treated as a second-rate human being. Societal attitudes are central to how disability is portrayed in fiction, and the language used is crucial. Children's literature tends to label disabled characters as 'different' or 'special'. Whatever the intention, this usage is discriminating. Every individual is different and special.

All this argument, however, brings us back to the initial definition of the body. In order to function in her community and society, Laureth uses sophisticated technology, available to her because of her privileged position in a social hierarchy: she belongs to an affluent family in a country that offers support to the disabled. Her body is augmented by technology, not only making her able to cope with her everyday life, but in many ways making her superior to able-bodied people. Modern technology and biomedicine provide sick and disabled people with a wide range of equipment and medication. Posthuman theory might ask a tentative question about the point at which the presence and scope of augmentation goes beyond the body being human. Myopic people do not think of themselves as human/object hybrids simply because they wear eyeglasses, but strictly speaking, they are. Some people are biochemically modified by taking medication that supports their metabolism or regulates their neurotransmitters. We use mobile phones as an extension of our memory or spatial orientation, a mental prosthesis.

In *The Fault in our Stars* (Green 2012), we meet two hybrid bodies: one uses artificial lungs, the other has an artificial leg. However, we probably do not think of them as hybrids; hybridity is simply a part of what they are. When does personhood stop? A famous example from children's literature is the Tin Woodman (Baum 2000), who is turned from human into non-human gradually, his limbs and body being chopped off one by one. Within the Oz fiction he seems to retain his identity, even though he believes that he lacks the most essential token of being human, a heart. A heart is in this case not a physical organ, but a metaphor for ability to experience emotions.

There are science fiction stories in which human brains are implanted into animal or mechanical bodies (Dickinson 1991). There is realistic fiction in which a human being receives a heart of a pig (Blackman 2000.) Posthuman philosophy, which underpins posthuman literary studies, grapples with the questions of what happens to identity when the body is augmented or hybridised. In children's and young adult literature, these questions are inevitably overlaid by the central issue of children's literature: transition from childhood to adulthood. Previously, we tended to foreground this transition, especially in the social construction framework, ignoring or subduing other alterities present in texts. Almost anything could be viewed as a metaphor for growth (Trites 2014). Today, posthuman, cognitive and disability studies draw our attention to the physicality of growth.

The crucial question for me is how all these new ways of thinking about literature are

relevant to our field; whether we once again merely borrow concepts and tools from other discourses or develop a discourse of our own. The eternal, indelible question is that of the audience. How can writers targeting young readers convey, for instance, the complexity of inclusion/exclusion without either being overdidactic or running the risk of being incomprehensible or even misinterpreted? In my studies of children's fiction from a cognitive perspective (Nikolajeva 2014) I repeatedly emphasise that theories developed on the assumption that readers possess the necessary cognitive-affective capacity to engage with fiction cannot be directly transposed onto readers whose cognitive skills are still in the making. In adapting cognitive literary theory to the material I am working with, I had to take the cognitive level of the purported audience into consideration. For instance, empathy is not fully developed until late adolescence. The consequence is that young readers may not be able to adopt an outsider perspective that posthuman and other relevant theories presuppose. For good evolutionary reasons, children and young people are self-centred and automatically divide the world into 'me' and 'everything else', including humans, animals, objects and environment. This is a part of the natural order, yet we wish young people to abandon solipsism and develop empathic skills and ethical ways of thinking which we also perceive as a major human characteristic, duly reflected in children's literature (Sainsbury 2013; Mills 2016).

This is where narrative perspective plays a crucial role. We can only empathise with an outsider if we are allowed to shift perspective and adopt an insider subjectivity, whether through a first-person narration or internal focalisation. In real life, we can never penetrate another mind, whether human or non-human. Fiction allows us to do so. While we will never be able to know for sure what animals think or feel, we can, through our ability for imagination, speculate about their thoughts and feelings. While we have limited real-life experience of superhuman creatures, we can explore their non-human interiority through fiction. While those of us who have no direct experience of hybrid bodies can only guess what it may be like, fiction offers us vicarious experience of hybridity. Today's children and young people are likely to be the first generation to co-exist with and possibly be threatened by the new species of superhumans, and fiction can potentially prepare them for this challenge.

Contemplating from where contemporary children's literature research comes, I believe we can confidently claim that today's state of the art is largely a response to the previous dominance of constructivism. There are many factors at play, including awareness of climate change, of increasing social injustice, of political conflicts. It is hard to ignore the physicality of our lives, which calls for new ways of assessing literature targeting young people, as well as reassessing texts that have been discussed from other theoretical angles. Additionally, as already noted, recent achievements in medicine and technology pose questions about what it means to be human – questions that philosophers have always grappled with, but that have never been as materially

tangible as today.

Predictions are always ungratifying. Ten years ago I would have claimed that narratology carried answers to all questions. I still believe that no other theoretical issue can be dealt with unless we also pose the question of how this issue is represented through narrative devices. Yet it is not the definitive answer. Are we closer today to the definitive answer than we were thirty years ago? And what is the definitive question? Will, for instance, evolutionary literary criticism be able to explain children's literature as a side effect of evolution? I am prepared to explore this path.

As I mentioned in the beginning, today nobody can have a comprehensive overview of the field, any more than a Victorian scholar, or a Shakespeare scholar can have a comprehensive overview. Plurality of approaches, the sheer bulk of accumulated research, demands specialisation. We see this in the rapid emergence of focused networks: archival and historical studies, girlhood studies, picturebooks, comic books, digital literature. When we occasionally meet, in physical and virtual forums, we bring and share our specialised interests and knowledge, and where our trajectories intersect, random mutations occur that may potentially evolve into new, unpredictable directions. So it will continue.

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