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The Hidden Adult and the Hiding Child in Writing for Children?

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Introduction

Anyone who works in the field of children's literature as an academic discipline or in the field of writing for children will be all too well versed in the (im)possibility of producing child-centred writing and culture. This is aligned closely with the fact that the entire process of *writing* for children is problematised by a very simple truism, which is that children who read rely on stories written for them and rarely by them, and indeed written by almost anyone but them. And curious as it may seem, this presents us with an immediate ethical problem. Maria Nikolajeva reminds us that the, 'child/adult imbalance is most tangibly manifested in the relationship between the ostensibly adult narrative voice and the child focalizing character...' (Nikolajeva 2005: 8) which essentially suggests that nowhere else are power structures as obvious as they are in the relationship between adults and children. Most obviously, these can be seen through home, health, education, educators, extended family, social and cultural exchanges. But importantly, these can also be seen in the culture adults produce for children, such as books and their *written* worlds, toys, television shows etc., all of which, in a *normative* sense, are created by those in power for the powerless. The problem is that the *only* qualification required to be an expert in this field is to be an adult responsible for the child – whereupon the child, if we are to follow Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, is considered to be a silent witness, '...unlike other disempowered groups such as women,' who can speak for themselves, or through the collective voice of feminism, 'Children, in culture and history have no such voice...' (Lesnik-Oberstein 1994: 26). I have no wish to contest the wider reading of this but I do think the debate needs to be readdressed.

Perry Nodelman contends, rightly, that, 'Children's literature is literature that claims to be devoid of adult content that nevertheless lurks within' (Nodelman 2008: 341). And it is clear that his book on the 'hidden adult' is meticulously researched to come to this conclusion. But I have to confess that for me the 'hidden adult' is really the elephant in the room which is hiding another and possibly more important person, the 'hidden child'. Therefore I propose to take a critical tour through some of the issues this idea presents before concluding that it is time critical studies in the (im)possibility of writing for children re-addressed some of the problems it has inherited in the critical journey.

Part one: The (im)possibility of child-centred writing

This debate essentially began about twenty-five years or so ago, or at least it's simpler to join in here, when Jacqueline Rose, writing on Peter Pan, said:

Children's fiction is clearly about the relation [between adult and child], but it has remarkable characteristics of being about something which it hardly ever talks of. Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), *but where neither of them enter the space in between.* (Rose 1984: 1-2, my italic)

And she also confronted us with the idea that:

There is, in one sense, no body of literature which rests so openly on an acknowledged difference, a rupture almost, between writer and addressee. Children's fiction sets up the child as an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child *in*... Children's fiction draws in the child, it secures, places and frames the child. (1984: 1-2)

This idea of the child as outsider immediately alerts us to the ethical problem we are presented with because it also highlights the critical problem.

Children and children's literature is problematised by the idea that unlike those in more singular, subject and theoretical discourse positions, such as those represented by race, gender, sexuality and class, can turn their oppressed or negative individuality into a positive collected one (under a banner like feminism, for example). But the child's ability to inhabit a claim to collected identity is muted by its own silence for there is no collective banner such as 'childism' through which they can speak; children, in culture and history really have no such collective

voice to speak for them. Of that we are in agreement. This, in the eyes of some critics, renders child identity, individually and collectively (by adult marketers, educators, legislators etc, for example) helplessly to be constructed in the image articulated by an adult vision of childhood. Children's literature, it might be said, is a uniquely focussed lens through which children and young people are asked to look at images of themselves and the issues this presents are not easily dismissed. And I was thinking about this idea of the mute child, the constructed child, and in pondering a way to address it I remembered Richard Ellmann's biography of James Joyce (1983).

Ellmann tells several amusing anecdotes; among them is an account of Joyce and Gogarty strolling the shore on their usual search for money. One day they saw the poet (and their friend) WB Yeats' father, John Butler Yeats, walking on the strand and Gogarty, urged on by Joyce, said to him:

'Good morning, Mr. Yeats, would you be so good as to lend us two shillings?'
The old man looked from one to the other and retorted, 'Certainly not. In the first place I have no money, and if I had ... you and your friend would only spend it on drink.'
Joyce responded, saying, 'We cannot speak about that which is not.' (Ellman: 1983: 457)

It is Joyce's reply which is of interest to me here. Why indeed should he confirm the suspicions of a man who was not going to indulge him in the first place? Yeats' retort, presuming he already knew the answer to his own hypothetical question, replicates the normativity of an adult/child exchange in many ways. But it is just that, a presumption. Joyce had an answer but like the scamp he was, he decided not to articulate it.

Following the critical exegesis, thus far, it would suggest that, as adults, we ask of children that which we have no right to receive answers to because the questions are always rhetorical and the answer always already presumed, and thus always assumed that the child does not have an answer to give which we do not already know. But the key to this critique lies in Joyce's reply, 'We cannot speak about that which is not.' Sometimes writing about writing for children is seen to be just like that – indeed, can we speak about that which is not considered to be?

It does seem an absurdity to suggest it, despite the compelling arguments, but perhaps the critical debate has been approached from the wrong angle here. So let me re-phrase it in some way because as a writer I think it is important to the whole process of writing for children as an adult written, child-centred discourse.

Rose says:

Children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which rarely speaks. This is the impossible relation between adult and child... (Rose 1984: 1)

Using her definition, when Rose or indeed any of us write the words 'children's fiction', or 'children's literature', we are constantly alerted to the notion that once again what we are actually referring to is fiction or literature written *for* children, not *by* them. Thus the possessive apostrophe in 'children's' is deliberately rendered problematic because the possession is not theirs, it has never actually been theirs and never will be owned by them. It is an adult concept which has been proffered to them; written for them; given to them (for many reasons, we know, such as literacy and even for the sheer magic of reading, for example) on the basis that it is an adult's right to give it – and, it is to be hoped, not be squandered, in which case it 'could' be withheld, like Yeats' two shillings.

But this relies on a couple of assumptions that cannot possibly be true. To suggest a child is an 'outsider' in the literary process surely suggests that all readers are. That we adult writers are the makers and our readers are the receivers and that our job is to 'unashamedly take them in'. But surely we can't believe that in any literary relationship? No reader is ever passive in the cultural exercise and while it may *seem* that children are passive in the process – especially if we take the line that they are innocent children – it disregards something very important indeed, which is the simple fact that, children understand more than they can articulate at all the stages of their life. But try to imagine this another way: an author goes into a shop to buy a 'child' reader. An hour later he returns to say:

'I wish to complain about this reader what I purchased not half an hour ago from this very boutique.'
'Oh yes, the, uh, the Norwegian boy... What's wrong with him?'
I'll tell you what's wrong with him, my lad. 'E's dead, that's what's wrong with him!
'No, no, he's resting.'

With apologies to Cleese and Palin, the child is neither dead nor a parrot but a breathing, thinking being.

Of course, there is not a collective voice of 'childism', like 'feminism' for women, I am not convinced about labelling the child as 'other' either, it is just not that simple. I suspect that this is because I see children as occupying a radically different social space, and probably it is because theirs is contingent and genuinely temporary; in a way that is only ever shadowed in all the other demographic categories, they truly are in a process of becoming, not being, the woman, the black person, the gay etc. Those other demographic categories are pretty much stuck with their markers. But a child is an identity under erasure; the child only has a few years before he or she is camouflaged as 'one of us'. And those marked groups are conspicuous on the basis of their morphology, made up of its interconnected or interdependent parts, while the child is marked more on the basis of their stage of socialization and their neurological capacity alongside those interconnected or interdependent parts. Also the members of those groups have (wittingly or otherwise) entered the social contract, while the child has not yet reached that stage.

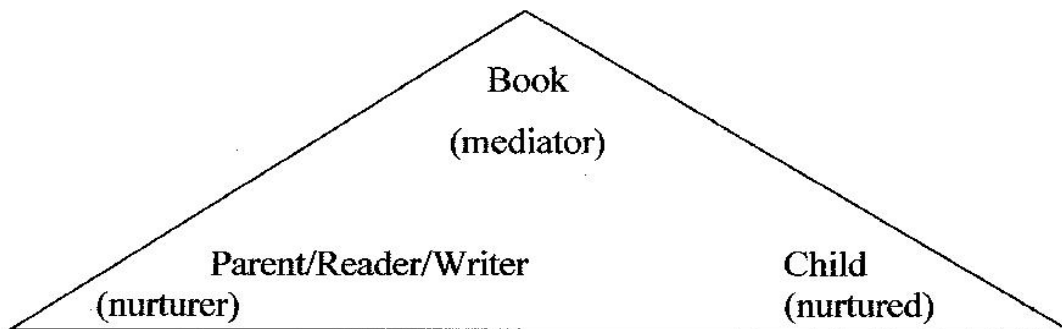
'The literature of childhood,' writes Roni Natov, 'moves between innocence and experience, between initiation and reflection...' and the '*connection* between childhood and adulthood is essential to the potential coherence of consciousness...' (Natov 2003: 3) and this reads as a good quotation but while the second part of the quotation is

correct the first part is problematic when linked to writing for children, even if we ask the question, what pre-cognizant child ever approached a book? Let's take this right back to the picture book stage before moving on – because the 'book' has a huge part to play in their development in this debate.

Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott introduce their book on picture books by saying:

The unique character of picturebooks as an artform is based on the combination of two levels of communication, the visual one and the verbal. Making use of semiotic terminology we can say that picture books communicate by means of two separate sets of signs, the iconic and the conventional. (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006: 1)

But I have an immediate problem agreeing with the main thrust of this 'combination of two levels of communication'. For me, there are three, not two 'levels of communication' in the picture book process. The third is the one of nurture, of shared experience, the relationship between the reader and the child as mediated by the book and the connections are explored and nurtured. It is as close as we can get to a critical, visual, literary and literal hug and to miss this point is to miss the function of the book and the potential it has in the nurturing process, and in making connections. In a reciprocal, shared experience the book becomes the mediator, as this simple diagram, which has also been shown before (see Melrose 2002).



As mediator in an experience shared by both adult and child the book is a huge and important psychological and sociological tool. Rather than thinking of this as a diagram, think about it as an actual experience, think about it being a reader/parent (for example) on a sofa with an arm around the child while both of them engage with the book, one reading the other looking at the pictures, listening to the words and engaging with the story. But there is more to this, is there not? More in the affective moment of intimacy, in the closeness of the hearbeats and in the experience such moments engender. How can this have no bearing on the entire experiential process? Look at the diagram this way:



And indeed how can it be said the child is muted, silent, an ‘innocent’ in this experience? I go into this in much more depth in Melrose (2011; 2012).

For Deleuze, according to Colebrook, ‘there is a direct link between philosophy, literature and ethics. If we limit thought to simple acts of representation – ‘this is a chair’, ‘this is a table’ – then we impose all sorts of dogmas and rules upon thinking’ (Colebrook 2002: 14). Indeed, even from a critical perspective we need to read the whole picture not just the represented one. But we also need to think what we are introducing the child to in this moment of nurtured exploration. As Deleuze also indicated:

Everyday moral narratives, such as fables, parables and soap operas, operate with the fixed terms of good and evil, and so from a shared point of view of common sense and human recognition. Literature destroys this border between perceiver and perceived. We are no longer placed in a position of ordering judgement but become other through a confrontation with the forces that compose us. This is freedom: not a freedom to judge which comes from knowing who we are, but a liberation from our finite self-images, an opening to life. At its simplest level we can see how ethical becoming or freedom is limited by a fixed image of thought. (Colebrook 2002: 131)

The picture book isn’t just a book of stories and pictures; it is a vital part of much more physical, emotional and developmental discourse, which becomes a polysensory event, where all the senses of touch, sound, sight, smell and taste, story, warmth, security, affection and love can be brought together in the shared intimate experience of a story as nurture that is mediated by the book – and thereby crucial to the development of the child. As Webb and I have already written:

This involves several epistemological acknowledgements. One is to confirm that we are indeed dependent upon intimacy, and that it is incumbent upon us all to nurture such relationships. This is at the heart of the African philosophy of the self, *ubuntu*, the humanistic ideal that can be loosely translated as, “a person is only a person in relation to others”. It is also at the heart of the communicative mode known as *parrhesia*: free speech, or openness; the speech that is about intimacy, honesty and truth. Intimacy is about communication with the other, and *parrhesia* is a form of intimacy that requires courage because there is risk involved in it: the risk of offending those to whom we are attached, the risk of hurting those we love, or those who love us, the risk of damaging our own reputation. (Webb & Melrose 2011)

Not putting too fine a point on this, it is not just a muddle of words and images of representation in translation or interpretation, there is a huge emotive element to be considered. Of course this also goes beyond the book in the rituals of parenting and aspects of teaching and so on. There is not enough space to consider this here, and it is enough to say what I have in drawing attention to it. It is also an introduction into the whole wide world of ideas, the picture book is not just dealing with cognitive and intellectual development but the *affective* which has to do with feeling and sensory experience.

Thus, to imply the child reader is an ‘absent cause’, a silent child, and muted, simply refers to silence as a hypothetical postulate, which is always expressed in ellipses... where the unsaid and unsayable does not mean the unknown (for the child’s time being) because the language a child needs to express knowledge comes after, through ageing and experience (lived in and lived out) and is gained, minute by minute, second by second, both primarily and vicariously, in their ongoing development which is never wholly innocent – and indeed I am persuaded more by Kristeva’s ‘semiotic chora’ (Kristeva 1998: 105) although there isn’t space to explore this in depth here, either. However, it would be a mistake to assume that children are not engaged in adult discourse while developing, just as adults engage with children’s. It is an ongoing dialogic experience of social engagement – and we, children and adults alike, are constantly engaged in, to paraphrase Peter Hunt’s phrase on Harry Potter, the ‘comfortably predictable and the unsettlingly unexpected’ experiences of life on a day to day basis. All of us are; what a dull world it would be if we became too grown up to be surprised by the unexpected of life, in which the *affective* has a huge role to play.

But children are insiders in this process, not outsiders and one of the central assumptions underpinning *their* experience is the significant overlap between non-fictional and fictionalised patterns of representation, precisely because these symbolic frameworks or discourses are in circulation through popular culture as well as real life situations and a fictionalised and non-fictional, experiential narrative combines to inform. Children frequently draw upon references to and images from fiction, film and television drama and the internet in combination with their real living experience in constructing *their* ‘stories’ as they struggle with articulating *the* stories that make up their lives.

Part two: The child is not. Any more than the adult.

I am somewhat embarrassed to appropriate it here in an adaptation of Franz Fanon’s famous phrase, ‘The negro is not. Any more than the white man.’ but as a way of an explanation I can say in tackling the issue of child-centred culture we really ought to be thinking, ‘The child is not. Any more than the adult.’ For the questions to be addressed are these: are the terms, for exclusion, or inclusion under erasure, the same for the colonised as they are for the child – or sufficiently comparable for it to be a safe line of argument? And is it indeed safe to say: The child is not. Any more than the adult? Because it is fraught with problems, and also it seems to me that we have address these before we can even begin to address what it means to be a reading child in the 21st Century, to understanding

how children are represented; why we write for children; what is written for children and what to consider when writing for children in creative, cultural and critical context, in this age of advanced communication and media.

When Homi Bhabha writes of Fanon's phrase, he calls the caesura that separates the two statements 'the inter', the 'in-between space', viz:

...we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture... by exploring [as opposed to dominating] this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity [adult/child in our case]. (Bhabha 1994: 38)

I have inserted my own engagement with this in the brackets to help with the meaning but if the location of culture is being met at the bridge, at the space *in-between* is there not accord of sorts because surely it also true that the adult author has no interest in writing unless the exercise, to paraphrase Foucault, 'failed to teach the *author* something he hadn't known before...' (Foucault cited in Rabinow 1984: 339). But crucially too, while it is not the same space as that occupied by those other demographic categories, because the child truly is in a process of becoming, not being, the woman, the black person, the gay in waiting, the oppressed minority and will in time come to enter a state of being permanently 'other' but can this really allow us to ignore the continual special case all children grow through and out of? And all the while they are constantly making connections. As Phillips has said:

Children unavoidably treat their parents as though they were experts on life ... but children make demands on adults which adults don't know what to do with ... once they [children] learn to talk they create, and suffer, a certain unease about what they can do with words. Paradoxically, it is the adult's own currency – words – that reveals to them the limits of adult authority... Adults can nurture children ... but they do not have the answers ... *what they can do is tell children stories about the connections...* (Phillips 1995: 1-2)

We tell the stories about the connections and this idea of 'making the connections' isn't a new one that I have just thought about. It goes back as far as Socrates, 469 BC-399BC, as far as we know, but as far as we don't know it has been going on forever. Think about this, early woman, bees, hives, stings, honey; someone made all these connections once. And nowhere is this more relevant than when we are dealing with ideas and the idea of experience being incorporated into a narrative. Socrates, in the instance I am thinking about, was attempting to explain a complicated mathematical theory to an uneducated slave. He did so by simply prompting the slave, step by step, by introducing new things to those he already knew.

But this idea of slippage in the dialectical binary between master and slave is very much what I am implying. It's not so much explaining or showing but helping others to connect to what they already know from other parts of life and then asking them to take the ideas forward into something they may or may not have thought about but are ready to explore. Children will then take what you have offered and incorporate it with their own thinking to take possession of the knowledge the mutual exploration imparts. And is this not a true Socratic journey. Socrates never claimed to be wise, only to understand the path a lover of wisdom must take in pursuing it. It is such a simple idea and I see no reason why writer of children's fiction cannot be thinking about it. It is not a question of binaries, them and us, me and you, adults and children but a mutual stroll down a Socratic path, in making connections.

Granted, the child is not, any more than the adult, but the space in-between remains as a metaphorical site where each, the reader and the writer has the right to negotiate and try to understand their own stories as well as the stories of others. For a child, the problem is their narrative voice is not yet mature enough to articulate their story. But just because there is not an instant response it does not mean they are not capable of thinking and knowing and indeed they are beginning to form the vocabulary; and it is more complex than we may think. As Jean Baudrillard says:

A strategy of this kind is far from innocent. It is the strategy adopted by children. Whereas adults make children believe that they, the adults, are adults, children for their part *let* adults believe that they, the children, are children... They *are* children, but they do not believe it. They sail under the flag of childhood as under a flag of convenience... (Baudrillard 1990: 192)

Part three: *Wunderkammer, Wunderkinder*

The criss-crossing of adult-centered and child-centered discourse I refer to in Part Two only serves to remind us that all discourse is about making connections. How can it not be the case that my experience (Nodelman's hidden adult) does not filter into a text written by me for someone less experienced? In anthropological terms it would be called 'diffusion', where ultimately every culture borrows from other cultures and incorporates it into their own; equally children and adults are tangled up in the same language, which is only differentiated by 'experience'.

It is a huge mistake to think that the child reader who comes to a book written by an adult is some passive (innocent) receptacle waiting to be filled with ideas. They are already the Socratic kids, absorbing the experience as they proceed through their lives, bringing what they know to the table while assimilating that which they know not. Their only problem being they, like all of us, know more than they can articulate at any given time. In writing this paper, I know more now than I did yesterday and I hope to know even more tomorrow, for as Jacques Derrida once wrote, '...future, this beyond, is not another time, a day after history. It is *present* at the heart of experience. Present not as a total presence but as a *trace*' (Derrida 1978: 95). As it is for me, so too is it for a child. Child-centred culture in this sense is experience in representation. As I have written elsewhere:

The idea that a representation of reality, created in any form, such as a novel or a film, for example, could be transferred from the real to the represented without change is a fantasy. It is a representation never a precise replication. The representation is in itself an experience, but it does not replace the true experience, it merely sits alongside it as another experience. The book [film, play, artistic event] is the medium through which the writer's experience is translated into a story. Thus, it mediates the transference of the experience of the writer to the reader as another experience. (Melrose 2002: 9)

What it is not and can never be is a whole narrative. No story in a book is 'complete' it is a 'representation' to accompany other representations alongside the real, and as such is only a component part of a much wider experience which is the story narrative. The book doesn't provide completeness in the story, it opens up possibilities. But most importantly, the receiver, the reader, the child all bring ideas to the text which are huge contributing factors in the gaining of experience. None of us are read to or read passively, none of us attend a stage play passively, view an artwork passively it is an active, cultural event. In the case of a young child and to repeat (again) it is an event where all the senses of touch, sound, sight, smell and taste, story, warmth, security, affection and love can be brought together alongside historical learning and the astonishment of the new in the shared experience of a story as part of the nurturing process. And while Nodelman spent great swathes of his book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* on the idea of 'the hidden adult' in children's literature, I can't help repeating that for me the adult in children's cultural product is not hidden but the biggest elephant in the room and that the person critics should be focussed on is the 'hidden child'. The film, the play, the book, the adult created, child-centred product is part of a much wider cultural narrative system which is the storehouse of the child and childhood, and much larger than the simple issue of the (in)completeness of words and pictures on a page.

It might be useful to think of the cultural experience and the narrative storehouse as a *Wunderkammer*. As Webb says, 'Of course the notion that it is primarily artists who reflect on and make representations about society is too limiting; engagement with, critique of and reflections on society, and the translation of such reflections into representations, is very much a human act' (Webb 2009b). Children are an inexhaustible receptacle of story narrative where they gather the fragments, souvenirs, memorabilia, photographs, images, words, ideas, thoughts, dreams, hopes and desires as their own personal collection of incomplete narratives that go to make up their understanding of the self. In their own little and ever expanding *Wunderkammer* they put on record their own and others' stories. 'This is both a valid and a necessary act: 'art' (or making representations) in this broadest sense, as well as in the more commonly accepted sense of 'art,' is about keeping the soul alive: it involves our being human, telling stories, and crafting, critiquing and maintaining society. It demands responsibility in the selection of stories to be told, and in the selection of perspectives from which to do the telling.

In thinking about the child as a *Wunderkammer*, of course, I am not describing them as cabinets of curiosities, or cabinets of wonder, but I am using *Wunderkammer* as a metaphor for the child, not as some structural and structuralist repository but as a bottomless storehouse of story narrative. In which case, to use the same terminology, they are the *Wunderkinder*.

There is something persuasive in its metaphorical potential as an explanation of a repository of experiences as story that is the *Wunderkinder* / child, which combines the real and the imagined and the self and other. Is this not closer to a description of the (in)complete story narrative of the child and childhood? But that is not to say the picture book does not have a huge part to play as a story narrative. As Webb also says:

One strand of this loop is the fact that there is little actual difference between the experience of physical stimuli, and the mental abstraction of reading and thought. This might seem unlikely; but... the gap between the 'real world' and 'mere representation' is not always as evident as common-sense would suggest. New research into how the brain works is shifting our understanding of how individuals make sense of the world, and convey sense to others ... representation is considerably more than a simple matter of standing in for; it is also productive of what we know, and how we know it: that is to say, it is communicative – it makes us. (Webb 2009a: 5)

And this idea of it being, 'productive of what we know, and how we know it: that is to say, it is communicative – it makes us' is extremely relevant and interesting. We can immediately see how the in between space, between adult and child – using Rose's definition – can be negotiated to great and responsible effect, where the cultural event like the picture book, for example, becomes this force of good in the cognitive, experiential and social development of the child, just at the moment when the child is trying make sense of the world. Stories, after all, function to help us understand who we are, where we have been, and where we might be going. Walter Benjamin might have referred to this as the trading of experiences, the *Erfahrung*, where the shift between 'lived through' and 'narratable experience' is seen as a point of arbitration and negotiation, in an exploration of experience and ideas. As Goswami writes:

It is now recognized that children think and reason in the *same* ways as adults from early childhood. Children are less efficient reasoners than adults because they are more easily misled in their logic by interfering variables such as contextual variables, and because they are worse at inhibiting information... The major developmental change during the primary years is the development of self-regulatory skills... Cognitive development is experience-dependent, and older children have had more experiences than younger children... (cited in Livingstone 2009: 16-17)

And this easily links up with Webb's idea on 'real' and 'vicarious' experience. As they grow through their childhood, children frequently draw upon references to and images from fiction, film and television drama and the internet etc., in combination with their real living experience in constructing *their* stories. This has to be borne in mind when producing child-centred culture. But surely the greatest element in any form of representation is

surprise; it is what makes a good story great, good art great, good films great and I would be surprised if you were surprised to hear that.

But crucial to this is the idea that the child as *Wunderkammer* never comes to the book in a state of ‘innocence’ he or she is *always* and *already* a storehouse of ideas, all writing for children can do is add to the store, adding the new to the already assimilated, allowing children to bring what they know to what they, as yet, may know not – or indeed what they may know but as yet are unable to articulate, for they may have not yet encountered the words used to describe them. But do any of us ever lose that quest? I am not yet sure I have all the words required to describe love, for example, and then there is the world of physics and particles and mathematics and... and... and...

Part four: ‘In dreams begins responsibility’ (WB Yeats)

I think this next issue is a huge, albeit ignored idea which we should be addressing in more detail than hitherto it has been. This ‘space in between’ the adult and the child, which we began with in Rose’s exposition, is one of experience. The gap is between the child and the author or parent’s experience, between the experience of authority and the child’s inexperience. But it is the writer’s job to try and recognise the gap by providing a text allowing it to be bridged. How, though: you might ask? Well knowing about it helps. But let’s think it through. Let’s go back to Adam Phillips’s observation,

Children unavoidably treat their parents as though they were experts on life... Adults can nurture children ... but they do not have the answers ... *what they can do is tell children stories about the connections...* (Phillips 1995: 1-2)

For the writer, making the connections is the first job she or he has. What we can do as writers is help with the *connections* because the child that comes to the book is already an intelligent but inexperienced person and it is the writer’s job to know that.

Thus, stories are the sites of exploration already exposed by the way we culturally assimilate ideas. It was WB Yeats who said, ‘In dreams begins responsibility...’ (quoted in *Responsibilities*, 1914). Which implies that ‘art’ and ‘writing’ have responsibility; that it is child-centred should make no difference at all for surely it can be concluded that actually the idea of being a ‘developing reader’ is almost universal. I am not a child, I am a university professor with a PhD in literary studies, but I could never say I was no longer developing my reading skills. For me, personally, it’s a life exercise in making the connections in the pursuit of knowledge which is always just around the next corner, over the next hill, across the next stream, under the next rainbow and ... well, you get the picture. I write (and read) to find out what I know, and know not, and then some more I hope to know.

This confession from me only serves to confirm what Phillips has already written, which is that ‘adults are not fully competent with their own instruments, but there is nobody else for the child to appeal to. Children go on asking, of course, but eventually they have to settle for the adult’s exhausted impatience and the *fictions of life*’ (1995: 1-2). But it’s when Phillips goes on to qualify this that it becomes useful to the writer for children. He says, children’s questions, ‘just like the answers, can be baffling’ going on to add, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud wrote, ‘nothing can be brought to an end, nothing is past or forgotten.’ Curiosity is endless ... in a way that answers are not’ (1995: 1-2). I love that idea of endless curiosity, constantly seeking answers:

...the [writer for children] is not only the one who is supposed to know; he is the one who knows that he is suppose to know, which is to know something of extraordinary consequence – to know, as every child does somewhere, the sense in which nobody knows the answers. Childhood innocence is not naive trust, it is incredulity (what the child has to repress is an ironic scepticism). (Phillips 1995: 2)

The (im)possibility of writing for children is preceded by the knowledge that children grow up by being listened to but the adult writer does not have all the answers to child questions, all they can do is tell children stories about the connections. And this sums up the debate for me, ‘The idea of nurture is a persuasive one. The so-called space between the child and the adult/writer is actually the place where the two collide, where the story exists, where experience and knowledge is nurtured and where real contact is made. Children do catch their parents/storytellers up (it is what growing up is all about – it is why the process is nurtured) and so in the meantime, on their catch up journey the storyteller can only, ‘...tell children stories about the connections.’ So the issue becomes not ‘why should we?’ write for children but ‘how?’

Phillip Pullman calls it the ‘once upon a time business...’ and the once upon a time should be a very ethical place to be. The fact is stories are full of half truths; oxymorons, paradoxes; inconsistencies; absurdity; contradictions; illogical ideas; strangeness; otherness; familiarity; intimacy; formality; informality; knowledge, wisdom; know how; erudition; culture; learning and, let’s be honest, everything, even the down right daft. In his 1996 Carnegie Medal acceptance speech, Phillip Pullman also said:

There are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children’s book ... stories are vital. Stories never fail us because, as Isaac Bashevis Singer says, ‘events never grow stale.’ There’s more wisdom in a story than in volumes of philosophy... We don’t need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of do’s and don’ts: we need books, time, and silence. Thou shalt not is soon forgotten, but Once upon a time lasts forever. (Pullman 1996)

Writing for children is about speaking the silences and recognising the hidden child, where once upon a time last forever and the end of the story is just another beginning.

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