Genre and Convention

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Questions of canonicity

In common with other academic disciplines which endeavour to extend the frontiers of knowledge to bring greater understanding, children's literature is a dynamic, questioning, and self-reflexive field of study. Much deliberation, debate, wordage, and intellectual soul-searching has gone into defining, interrogating, and establishing children's literature as an academic discipline, and the process continues. As discussed by colleagues in this book, the establishment of children's literature as an academic discipline has not been an easy task. However, the very fact that a text such as this exists is evidence of the success, security, and dynamism of the field. Two areas central to this discussion of genre and convention underpin the establishment of children's literature as an academic field of study, namely, questions pertaining to the canon and the notion of a classic children's book. Such parameters lead to the consideration of genre and convention in children's literature. From a pragmatic viewpoint one could rephrase these discussions as questions asked by someone formulating a programme in children's literature: "Which books should I choose?" and having selected them, "What should I teach?" and furthermore, "Why?" Reduction to the pragmatic can oversimplify matters somewhat, since those "innocent" questions mask a host of cultural, social, and political complexities.

In order for a subject to become accepted as a field of study in universities and schools, it is necessary to establish a set of validating parameters. Firstly, academics setting up a field have to identify a sufficient body of work which deserves study; and that such a body of work represents standards which can be used to critique and evaluate other work. Secondly, it is essential to prove that such a body is not merely a transient phenomenon, i.e. that a history can be identified and constructed, thereby signifying a sense of evolution. Thirdly, the pioneering body of academics has to demonstrate that, after the stage of identification, the work withstands fruitful interrogation and critical analysis and makes a significant contribution to knowledge and the understanding of how we function, as human subjects and as subjects within social systems, and how those systems themselves function and why. The test, as it were, is the extent and level of debate which is generated within the emergent field and beyond. Diversion, rejection, and reformulation then come into play, as individuals and schools of thought identify and—one hopes—justify and examine their own parameters and criteria for selection. A canon is, therefore, in one way a positive necessity and liberation, in another a possibly stultifying restriction. The key here is to view the identification of a canon as a starting point, a set of benchmarks to be reviewed—or "touchstones" to use Perry Nodelman's phrase (Nodelman 1985)—to be reviewed, then added to and evaluated. The other key point is to recognize that in an area such as children's literature the interested parties are numerous, and will each construct its own designated canon for its own particular purpose. The question which naturally emerges is: "Can a singular canon exist in children's literature?" An answer has to be considered within the context of the debate about the general notion of a canon.

In 1948, when F. R. Leavis published his articles from Scrutiny as The Great Tradition (Leavis 1948) in order to make a stand as to which texts in his opinion deserved literary study in English universities, the debate regarding the study of English Literature was a great deal simpler. He was speaking from a singular established position of power, that of the dominance of the university system at the top of the pyramid of education, and of the dominance of the white, middle-class, presumably heterosexual male. By contrast, the field of children's literature has been built and formulated and grown by a "bottom-up" approach, with a high proportion of women engaged in the process. Educationalists, teachers, librarians, literary scholars, writers, artists, publishers, and book collectors have all variously been involved, plus academics from other disciplines, such as history, psychology, sociology, media, and cultural studies; not to mention the various ideological and religious parties which straddle the professions. This process has been carried out within national boundaries, and also internationally. As the field has developed and become more complex, one may add to this the differing foci of study such as nineteenth-century children's literature, or gender studies and methodological approaches derived from theoretical positions, such as...
structuralist criticism, New Historicism, or cultural materialism. What is under consideration in terms of the contemporary study of children's literature is a subject area which both shapes, is shaped by, and reflects, the multiplicity of postmodernity and the construction and reconstruction of cultures. The strength and weakness of any canon, as well as its determining factor is, by definition, that which is excluded: the silenced as well as the articulated. Karen R. Lawrence's statements on the adult canon of English literature in her introduction to the aptly-titled Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century "British" Literary Canons (1992) are fully pertinent to the implications of canon formation in children's literature:

If tradition is regarded as a form of cultural imperialism, then these essays seek to decolonize the empire's literary territory. The conflicts that produce the canon occur on the levels of production and reception; they involve writers' confrontations with inherited tradition and evaluation of texts in relation to it. (Lawrence 1992, 2)

In the current context I would rewrite that sentence as follows:

If tradition is regarded as a form of cultural imperialism, then scholars of children's literature seek to decolonize the empire's literary territory. The conflicts that produce the canon occur on the levels of production and reception; they involve writers' and academics' confrontations with inherited tradition and evaluation of texts in relation to it.

The following brief consideration of the debates surrounding the notion of a canon variously arising over the past thirty years, will serve to illustrate the above discussion, and demonstrate the developing diversity of considerations to be taken into account, moving from a national to an international perspective. At this point I wish to acknowledge the enlightening and helpful conversations with my German colleague, Martina Seifert, and the full and excellent discussion of canon formation by Emer O'Sullivan in her book Comparative Children's Literature (O'Sullivan 2005), and in addition Emer's generous access to her work prepublication. I strongly recommend her chapter "World Literature and Children's Classics," both for an overview of the debate concerning a canon, and for her argument for the need for a canon to provide a core of "touchstone" texts for formulating courses of study on children's literature. As she rightly states:

Since schools and universities, with their need to impart exemplary values, have been and still are the main agencies in canon formation, one can understand why, although some individual works of children's literature have been acknowledged as classics, there is no canon of children's literature based on the authority of carefully cultivated tradition. As it was not regarded as a part of great literature it was not taught as an academic subject, and received hardly any attention in universities. But the need for a canon is now becoming evident in children's literature studies, for the purposes of writing the history of literature and for university teaching. This canon is established by means of consecrating and preserving the most important texts, by the endeavours to make the subject academically respectable. (O'Sullivan 2005, 130)

O'Sullivan's call in 2004 for a canon, in general and in relation to her particular expertise and drive to develop the study of World Literature, echoes the impetus behind the Children's Literature Association project, carried out almost a quarter of a century earlier in 1980, when "readers of the ChLA Quarterly were asked to name those books they considered to be most significant in a variety of categories" (Nodelman 1985, 7). At that time children's literature as an academic study was developing at university level. As this was a project instigated by the American-based ChLA it is not surprising that the focus was on critical interest in the field from an Anglo-centric and American perspective. The result was the Touchstones series edited by Perry Nodelman. His introduction in the first volume records the process and the criteria used for selection and elimination:

The committee considered a number of possible "canons." At one point, (they) prepared a list of hundreds and hundreds of "good" books—an interesting guide to a lifetime of reading, but, we soon realised, far too general, far too broad in its definition of value to serve any more particular purpose. A list that might actually help to define excellence had to separate the good from the likeable, and the great from the good... (Nodelman 1985, 7)

The Touchstones series comprises a wide range of critical discussions made by individual critics who focus on one text which they have
selected as being worthy of inclusion in the canon, and demonstrate the reasons for selection in their essay; the series thus builds a suggested canon. One consideration is the relevance of the text to the modern child reader. For example, Ruth K. MacDonald suggests in her chapter on Louisa May Alcott's nineteenth-century novel *Little Women* (1868) that:

Certainly the multi-cultural, quickly paced urban lives that so many American children lead today would not predispose them to the leisurely, sentimental journey that Alcott offers. Yet that journey still has much to offer them. (Macdonald 1985, 13)

The underlying criterion for selection here is pedagogic in nature, i.e. that the reading of this text will be beneficial for the American child reader in 1985, and that there are values and experiences in the process of reading which are transferable across the boundaries of time. The question of the child as the implied reader and actual reader, plus matters of dual address, (i.e. where the text addresses both the child listener and the adult reader, as in Milne's *Pooh* stories), further complicate the question of canonicity in the field of children's literature, since the range of criteria needs to account for these variables.

Zohar Shavit considers canon formation in *Poetics of Children's Literature* (Shavit 1986) from the viewpoint of children's literature as part of a cultural system. Her predominantly Anglo-centric historical discussion includes, amongst other matters, the notion of childhood, education, and publishing practice:

... it was through the framework of the educational system that a canonized children's literature system began to develop; at the same time, it was the need to combat popular literature from which the stratification of the whole literary system emerged. (Shavit 1986, 134)

Thus the far-reaching influence of educational practice in determining good literature for children is identified as a factor. The National Curriculum for England and Wales currently suggests texts which can be used to develop children's reading, and to enable the study of literature and the understanding of cultures. The imperative for academic courses which teach children's literature to those teachers, who are one of the primary sources of provision of literary experience and knowledge for children, is to make them aware of where the texts they select sit in relation to the wider field: hence the return to the notion of canon.

In the indications I have given thus far—and they are merely indications, since this is a subject which has rightly generated much discussion over many years—the complexities and debates surrounding the questions of canon for the field of children's literature are becoming evident. The one conclusion of which one can be sure is that there is no fixed canon for the field as yet. Should this situation arise, then fixity would not reflect the development, evolution, and diversity of the field, and reconsideration and updating would be a necessity. Furthermore, since the study of children's literature, *per se*, is an international field then a singular canon, with clearly agreed criteria, would have to incorporate full representation from each country, which returns us to Emer O'Sullivan's point about writing literary history. The establishment of literary histories for children's literature is an important academic and "political" goal for, unlike literature for adults, children's literature is not automatically recognized by academia as being important, academically valid, nor "visible,"—therefore, literary historians and critics who engage in literary history play an important role in identifying texts which contribute to canon formation.

If one is seeking to begin in an area of study, then titles which include words such as "Introduction to" or "Introducing" are bound to be attractive starting points. Publishers and booksellers are well aware of this search tool, since, for example, of the 2.8-million books in all subject areas in Blackwell's online bookshop, 10,000 have those words in the title. The publishing industry has a powerful and central role in either enabling or hindering the availability of books. With the usual print run of books for children and academic texts being very small, a book may well go out of print before it has had time to circulate, because the pressures of the costs of shelf space for publishers and booksellers are considerable. The availability of out-of-copyright texts in electronic format can ease the situation in some circumstances; however, this alternative publishing depends upon individual enthusiasts, societies, and grant-funding bodies, such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

So, as a new student to the field of children's literature, where should one seek this elusive list which delineates the canon, say in English literature? In short, to my knowledge, it does not formally exist. John Rowe Townsend's *Written For Children* (Townsend 1965) was a starting point in identifying a history of writing for children in English, with the inclusion of some chapters on American books. Peter Hunt's pioneering work over the years has taken the historical perspective combined with literary criticism, and has variously included invaluable lists of titles and publication dates, for example in *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (Hunt 1994). He has also published an extremely useful anthology which makes available both the well-known and less so, *Children's Literature: An Anthology*.
1801–1902 (Hunt 2001), which adds to the potential range of texts available for study outside library archives and collections. Peter has contributed to the resources of the field by publishing collections of key critical essays, which may also become difficult to access from the range of sources available to the less experienced seeker, who may become somewhat overwhelmed by the diversity of journals and critical collections available. A further initiative was the publication of his International Companion Encyclopaedia of Children’s Literature (Hunt and Ray 1996), the second edition of which has recently been published. In addition there is a recent move by publishers and academics to produce encyclopaedias which variously take children’s literature as their subject. They are being published both in hardcopy and electronic format; for instance, the forthcoming Encyclopedia of American Children’s and Young Adult Literature edited by Connie Kirk, and the Continuum Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature edited by Bernie C. Cullinan and Diane G. Person (Cullinan and Person 2001). Children’s literature is also being included in other similar publishing projects, such as the online Literary Encyclopaedia (http://www.litencyc.com/) and the new Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Matthew et al. 2004). Whereas fiction for children is sufficiently documented in such texts, by comparison drama is considerably under-represented. The history of English poetry for children has now been documented by Morag Styles in her highly-informative, historically-based From the Garden to the Street (Styles 1998), however there is still a good deal of critical work and documentation to be done in this area from Styles’ sound beginnings.

The problem still remains as to how one might formulate a programme in the study of children’s literature when there is so much to choose from, and where there is almost a “confusing” freedom of choice considering the annual output of 7,500 books on average per year in the English-speaking market, plus the other national and world markets. A point to note here is the lack of books translated into English, standing at a maximum of eleven annually, not expressed as a percentage, but the total number of texts; compared with say 85% of books for children per annum in the Icelandic market being in translation from a wide range of languages. The reasons for the lack of books in translation available on the English market emanate from the high costs involved and the difficulties perceived (real or otherwise) by publishers with the translation of culture for the child reader (Webb 1993). The situation emphasizes the dominance of Anglo-American culture both in terms of texts and hence in critical appreciation. Turton & Chambers is a publishing house which has sought to redress the imbalance, although it is an almost insurmountable task. Aidan Chambers, the academic, educationalist, acclaimed critic, and author for children was a driving force behind this initiative. The Turton & Chambers website has a number of pertinent and hard-hitting articles and discussions on the subject, including archived newspaper articles. For example, Catherine Lockerbie, Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival attacked the UK publishing industry in The Independent as follows:

We don’t publish nearly enough translated works in this country. We talk about joining Europe as a political entity yet more often than not we don’t know what they’re reading or what they’re writing so we don’t know what they’re thinking. (Quoted in Kelbie 2003)

Here Catherine Lockerbie is speaking for literature overall, and within that children’s literature comes as a secondary consideration. Added to this question of availability of texts from other languages are the barriers raised by publishers to the global marketing of books. It is difficult, for example, to obtain works by smaller publishing companies, from Ireland or Australia. The control by corporate bookselling outlets results in the under-representation, if not the total invisibility, of the more specialist publishers. For example, the excellent work published by the Australian publishers Lothian, who have a speciality in picture books, with authors such as the award-winning Gary Crew, is absent from UK bookshops. Admittedly there is notion availability via the World Wide Web, however this is not always as straightforward as one would suppose, especially when ordering a number of texts for teaching purposes.

The power and influence of the publishing industry is also evident in the definition of the term “classic.” A “classic” is defined in publishing terms as a text which has remained in print, which is a denomination regardless of literary considerations. The commercial is considered when assessing the cultural impact of a text, for example the rise of the Harry Potter phenomenon, where sales of J. K. Rowling’s books have soared to the top of the adult as well as the children’s lists across the world. For the literary scholar questions of, for instance, poetics, quality, and literary value come into consideration (see for example Shavit 1986). However, what “literary quality” really is forms a debate in itself. In his article “How Not to Read a Children’s Book” (Hunt 1995) Peter Hunt convincingly argues the difficulty of defining literary quality by comparing Kenneth Grahame’s classic children’s book The Wind in the Willows (Graham 1908) as a literary text approved of in terms of what would be described as high literary culture, with the work of Enid Blyton, a populist writer.
His conclusion is that literary criteria are very difficult to apply across the board, since Blyton's work demonstrates qualities which could be applied to that of Kenneth Grahame, or any other author whose work is taken seriously by the literary establishment. A classic text could be one which clearly demonstrates, for example, narrative form, or the defining characteristics of a genre. It could also be a text which acts as a cultural and historical reference point. Hunt takes such criteria and applies them to the work of both writers, proving that Blyton's *Five Go Down to the Sea* (Blyton 1953) is as relevant to the construction of an Arcadian English childhood, as that of Kenneth Grahame, whose work is perceived as being central. Furthermore, Hunt argues that on this basis, *Five Go Down to the Sea* can be cited as a valid precursor to the work of children's authors such as Alan Garner and Philippa Pearce who are celebrated for their high-quality literary contribution to writing for children (Hunt 1995, 237). Hunt's position here is for "childist criticism," a critical approach which takes into account that this is literature for children, and that reading considerations such as the culture of childhood, which lie beyond obvious matters such as literacy, should also be taken into account:

those of us who are concerned with children's literature need to beware of the trap laid for us by the very concept of "literature" and literary standards that claim to be (or aspire to be) authoritative but are actually like the emperor's clothes. If we are taping into this mystery of what meaning children make, and if we value it at all, as we purport to, we have to see them making it within their own culture, as well as in relationship to other cultures (such as that which validates "literature"). (Hunt 1995, 239)

To conclude this section on the canon and the notion of a classic, I wish to return to the question which initiated this discussion: "Which texts are valid choices for formulating a teaching programme in children's literature?" The key to constructing a set of texts for study, as stated above, is defining the purpose of such a composition, taking the notion of cultural and historical reference points, and the concept of the dominance of the classic in the literary imagination as defining an undefined (and possibly indefinable) benchmark in terms of literary quality. The example I wish to cite is that of the work of Sandra Williams, which is available in her unpublished Ph.D. thesis, "An investigation into readings of cultural indicators embedded in English children's literature texts" (Williams 1998). Prior to her Ph.D., Sandra was working for the British Council in the Czech Republic to teach English to Czech student teachers on a fast-track course of English language, literature, and British Studies. The constraining pragmatic considerations were, amongst others, the time factor and availability of texts. Her decisions in formulating the course had to be time-effective and efficient, and based on texts which could be readily obtained. This was before the advent of online book buying and few people had computers then, especially under the circumstances in which Sandra was working in the Czech Republic. An additional, and major, consideration, was the economic differences between the Czech Republic and the UK. As Sandra has pointed out in conversation, "a few books were equivalent to a week's wages" for the Czech students. Again this is a constraint imposed by the publishing industry, and one which has serious implications for the development of programmes. She elected to use texts written for children for two reasons: firstly because her Czech students were going to be teaching English to children; and secondly, most of the texts could match their level of English. Her choice of texts was enlightened and has proven enlightening for those who have both studied with her and read her work. Through her text selection she gave her students the opportunity to study and critique contemporary British culture. An easy option would have been to abstract a "conventional" model of "Britishness" from John Rowe Townsend's work. Instead Sandra combined classics such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865) with Michael Rosen's *Culture Shock* (Rosen 1991). Sandra formulated a programme which ranged across genres, enabling her students to interrogate the breadth of "Britishness." They might otherwise have retained outmoded stereotypical images of royalty and the white cliffs of Dover, as opposed to the richness and complexity of an evolving British multicultural society in debate with itself as presented through her choice of texts.

The essential point underpinning Sandra Williams' ground-breaking work is that, in order to deconstruct the canon and interrogate British culture, she had to have a clear and informed idea of what that canon "was," which she drew from the reference books discussed above, and her considerable experience as a secondary school teacher. The literary and the educational were combined in her thinking and practice. Furthermore she carefully considered the reasons for her programme design, and her own political and pedagogic position. In other words the "used" the canon to fire her creativity as an educator and critic. The importance of a canon is, in conclusion, twofold: in relation to the field as an academic subject, and as a series of "touchstones" to develop new work, and break boundaries, both visible and invisible.
Boundaries and breaking them: genre and convention

A canon is, in itself, as discussed above, a concept and representation which is defined by boundaries. The components are texts, authors, and also genres. Within a canon, however, there are other defined, bounded elements such as genre. Children's literature shares some generic categorization with adult literature, as well as displaying some which are specific to the field, such as the school story. Comparison of which genres are applicable to adult literature and which to children's literature raises an interesting set of questions germane to the overall subjects of canon, genre, and convention. When colleagues who are not involved with teaching children's literature were asked to nominate genres in adult literature, their answers were convergent: prose, poetry, and drama: then, for example women's writing, classic realism, crime fiction, and historical fiction, with a general reluctance to identify genres. No one, for example, immediately mentioned the nineteenth-century social-problem novel, or sensationalist fiction, since these are specific to the study of nineteenth-century literature, and the question probably prompted a less time-specific response. They felt more comfortable with Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. In their terms the organization of adult literature as academics is not so determined by genres, but by time periods and literary movements, plus the overt politicization of literature, as in the study of Women's Writing. I then added to this conversation that thus far I had a list of thirty-one genre categories for children's literature, principally taken from the German work of reference by Günter Lange (ed.), *Taschenbuch der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur* [Handbook of Children's and Youth Literature] (thanks again to Martina Seifert for this information). They are as follows, with my additions in italics: fairy tales; myths; sagas; fables; didactic stories; moral stories; realist(ic) children's literature; fantasy; the fantastic (phantastic); animal stories; religious children's literature; adventure stories for boys; adventure stories for girls; domestic fiction for girls; girls' stories; the school story; the island story; the psychological children's novel; detective stories; science fiction; the novel of adolescence; the Young Adult novel; historical fiction; magic(al) realism; poetry; drama; picture books; flap books; paper sculpture; comics; film and media representation.

Autobiography is a notable absence, whereas it is a genre central to the study of Women's Writing. The identification of the gap makes visible the power relationship in that children's literature is also writing for children by adults. The diary of Anne Frank (Frank 1997) is an exception in that these are her words, her account of her short life. The other emanation from this brief comparative exercise is that colleagues nominated "crime fiction" as well as detective stories. What is brought into focus here is the sense of moral responsibility embedded in children's literature. "Detective fiction," as included in the list of genre in children's literature, may well deal with crime; however, it is the way of reading which is emphasized: working out clues through the narrative(s); learning about "red herrings:" learning how to "read" actions and people; making projections and predictions; discriminating, putting together information and coming to a solution—becoming and being the detecting reader. The adult nomination "crime fiction" puts the emphasis on the moral and social transgression, whereas "detective fiction" is placing the reader in an active and positive role: on the "right side of the law," as it were.

The question then arises as to why there are so many genres in the categorization of children's literature? The above list is certainly not exhaustive. What it does indicate are the types of work and writing which one is likely to encounter, and the kinds of conventions which will operate. I have arranged the list in a general order which suggests the chronological development of literature for children; however this will not be the same pattern for all countries and cultures. The children's literature of a particular country and/or culture may evolve with the emphasis on some genres and the absence of others. For example, Greek literature for children has traditionally dominated into the genre of realism, with a strong political determination, and, until very recently, the absence of fantasy (Sandis 2000). In contrast the English tradition has displayed a strong disposition towards fantasy writing for children since the mid-nineteenth century. The school story (as discussed below) is also a clear and strong line through English writing for children, from Thomas Hughes *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (Hughes 1857), for instance, to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books and beyond, yet this genre is absent in other national and cultural literatures, to take Greece again as a case in point. New and adapted genres develop in response and in relation to cultural and literary circumstances.4 There is also a point at which form and genre cross. A story may use realism as a stylistic form to produce a narrative which is defined as fantasy in terms of genre, as in the case of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* (Pullman 1995). (See below for discussions of Fantasy and Realism.)

Some of the genres are defined in terms of a critical perspective, for example the psychological children's novel, whilst others incorporate divisions to do with the age of the reader, as with Young Adult Fiction, which implies levels of literacy certainly, but rather more importantly,
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In the character of the protagonist Diamond and the structure of the narrative, Diamond is a pure innocent, a “child of God.” His encounters with North Wind take him from the realities of urban working-class life in nineteenth-century England into other worlds of fantasy, including At the Back of the North Wind itself, a place of otherness and the uncanny which not even North Wind herself has ever seen. Diamond can recall but an impression of his experiences at the Back of the North Wind, and recounts these as poems which are circular in the rhythm and content of the rhyming couplets, taking Nature and the sense of interconnectedness and harmony as their subject. This novel encapsulates, for a child, a focal part of George MacDonald’s philosophical approach, which also includes the necessity for children to be educated, since one task for his protagonist is to learn to read, albeit outside a system of formal schooling.

Realism, fantasy, and the school story

The intention of this section is twofold: to combine a discussion of the two major forms, Fantasy and Realism, which can also be qualified as genres, with a consideration of the School Story; and to suggest how a line of argument may be developed through a programme of study in children’s literature, demonstrating the centrality of children’s literature to literary and cultural studies.

The fixing of form and genre is always debatable, and resolves to a series of conventions which produce a “definition.” Realism has been described by Kendall L. Walton as “a monster with many heads in need of disentangling” (Walton 1990, 329), whilst Lillian Furst has devoted an erudite text to the subject, aptly entitled Realism (Furst 1992). Fantasy is equally difficult to “fix.” Rosemary Jackson’s Fantasy: the literature of subversion (Jackson 1988), which focuses on adult literature, is a key reference point, whilst the work of Maria Nikolajeva in children’s literature and theory is central to understanding this form and genre (Nikolajeva 1988, 1995, 1996, 2000). Although realism and fantasy are, as genres, seemingly at opposite ends of a literary spectrum, there is a position of commonality, where forms can be interdependent.

Realism as a genre purports to convince the reader that this is a “real” world, that this is life as it “really” is. Conventions employed are, for example: detailed description; fixed initial positions, say with characterization; the “self” is a more fixed concept, lacking the division of Modernist thinking and the fragmentation evident in Postmodernism. The narrative voice tends to be singular and is typified in early work by
the omniscient narrator; plotting and narrative structure are linear. There is an underlying philosophical position and perspective which declares that there is "truth" which can be known. Early didactic moralistic writing for children such as Mrs Sherwood's *History of the Fairchild Family* (1818) employed realism, as evident in the following scene of moral and "scientific" education:

When they came to the door they smelt a kind of disagreeable smell, such as they had never smelt before; this was the smell of the corpse, which having been dead now nearly two days had begun to corrupt . . . At last Mr. Fairchild said, "My dear children, you now see what death is; this poor body is going fast to corruption. The soul I trust is in God; but such is the taint and corruption of the flesh, by reason of sin, that it must pass through the grave and crumble to dust . . . Remember these things, my children, and pray to God to save you from sin." (Mrs Sherwood, 1818. Cited in Townsend 1987, 30)

The technique can be compared with that employed by writers such as Mrs Gaskell in her writing of nineteenth-century social problem novels for adults. Such direct and unsentimentalized realism is evident in contemporary children's literature, such as Robert Swindells' *Stone Cold* (Swindells 1993), which confronts the reader with the world of teenage runaways who sleep on the streets. *Stone Cold* won the 1994 Carnegie medal for literacy achievement, and also, I would suggest, for its strength in drawing attention to its subject. English fiction for children has a leaning towards fantasy, whereas in Sweden, for example, Young Adult fiction is more directly realist.

Fantasy can also deal with social problems producing a critique of society: however, these are approached through the creation of an imagined reality. Fantasy and realism are interconnected in terms of form. Often a fantasy text has a frame of realism which enables the reader to enter and "realize" the fantasy world: it is the movement from the known and the recognizable to the unknown and the previously unimagined. The text itself, however, will be categorized in the genre of fantasy. The imagined world may be embedded in or through a "real" world, as in the Narnia stories by C. S. Lewis (1950–56), where the wardrobe is the entrance to the fantasy state. Time, place, and character can be disrupted and unstable, as in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), where Alice enters Wonderland via the rabbit hole and experiences a number of shifts in body size during her adventures. Time is dislocated, as is her sense of subjectivity, for she repeatedly wonders who she is, and is also questioned on this matter by the fantastic characters she meets. Magic is also a component of fantasy writing for children. E. Nesbit, for instance, employs a magic amulet to transport her characters into other times and other places (Nesbit 1906). Fantasy as a form encompasses other genres, such as the fairy tale and science fiction. It enables the writer to create and construct worlds of childhood and constructs of the child which stand beyond, and yet in relation to, reality. The Arcadian pastorals of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories (1926) create Romantic ideal worlds of protected childhoods, where animals, toys, and children play and "live" in idealized protection from the harshness and corruption of the "outside" worlds: innocence can grow gently and playfully through to experience. Fantasy is, however, not a soft genre. The subversive capacity of such writing enables harsh and hard-hitting critiques of social, political and religious systems—often in ways which would be unacceptable in adult fiction. One wonders whether Philip Pullman's critique of religious systems in his trilogy *His Dark Materials* (1995, 1997, 2000) would have reached publication had he been "aiming" at an adult market. Would he have been "allowed" to blow up God? Interestingly, the forthcoming film version has removed this radical element. Writing for children has been used as a cloak for political satire by writers such as Pushkin in his use of fairy tale, to produce alternative and dangerously subversive texts for adults. Furthermore, texts for children have been "adopted" by adults to critique and find solace under oppressive political systems, hence the popularity of Milne's *Pooh* stories with the Czechs under Soviet power.

The following discussion of the English School Story traces a line from the nineteenth century, which saw the beginning of the genre, to the employment of the conventions of the school story in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997). The starting point is the nineteenth-century boys' boarding school, a particularly English conceptualization, which was closely linked with Muscular Christianity. As Clifford Poulteney points out:

"Muscular Christianity" probably first appeared in an 1857 English review of Charles Kingsley's novel *Two Years Ago* (1857). One year later, the same phrase was used to describe *Tom Brown's School Days*, an 1856 novel about life at Rugby by Kingsley's friend, fellow Englishman Thomas Hughes. Soon the press in general was calling both writers muscular Christians and also applying that label
Jean Webb

Can be described as a form which is an ideal narrative structure. The school is bounded where is supplanted by the ethics, social interaction of the pupils. The school is bounded where is supplanted by the ethics, social interaction of the pupils. The school is bounded where is supplanted by the ethics, social interaction of the pupils. The school is bounded where is supplanted by the ethics, social interaction of the pupils. The school is bounded where is supplanted by the ethics, social interaction of the pupils. The school is bounded where is supplanted by the ethics, social interaction of the pupils. The school is bounded where is supplanted by the ethics, social interaction of the pupils. The school is bounded where is supplanted by the ethics, social interaction of the pupils.

Brown's Schooldays is realism, convinces the reader that this is a s who had not attended public a model which could produce a m the outside world. Whilst this values, the form was sufficiently values. In Stalky and Co (Kipling ly critical view of the elitist and of the public school system. The privilege as they destructively twentieth century, the critique of 1944 Education Act enabled the ary and then higher education, demonstrated a critical stance ines' novel A Kestrel for a Knave cting value systems represented hies of education in the 1960s. condary Modern School, and as to the majority of readers who system. Billy Casper comes from led by his brother. He is a social ng solace and a sense of identity teacher is young and progressive, y from the rigidity of middle-lid-centred philosophy. Here the realities and social problems Hines' novel brought together
two parallel worlds: the interior culture of the school and classroom, and the external culture of family and home—each representing different, and often conflicting, value systems and modes of behaviour. Both teacher and dislocated pupil try to learn to negotiate these barriers, although some are insurmountable. The school story was thus the vehicle for serious and far-reaching social critique; the conventions of power relationships and the questioning of such being central to the impact which this book made, and continues to make—for it is still studied as a recommended text in the National Curriculum. The gateway had, as it were, been opened for the television drama series Grange Hill by Phil Redmond (1978 onward), accompanied by a series of books by Robert Leeson for young teenagers. Grange Hill confronts and interrogates the contemporary culture of urban childhood in the East End of London, presenting and examining subjects such as bullying, gang warfare, homosexuality, drug abuse, etc. which may have been thought of as taboo in “mainstream” children’s literature, but which are, sadly, real components of children’s lives.

The Demon Headmaster by Gillian Cross (1982) was published six years before the National Curriculum was instituted by the Education Reform Act 1988, which established curriculum content and the testing of pupil performance in a very structured manner. Some view this as a restrictive and overly-controlling educational system which limits the creativity and the freedom of both students and teachers. Cross’s novel preempts this critical view and reflects the sense of disquiet prior to the National Curriculum being instituted. The Demon Headmaster shifts between realism and fantasy. The school setting is realistic; the Demon Headmaster is a creation of fantasy. The Headmaster is a megalomaniac who hypnotizes his pupils so that they achieve perfect test results. The children subvert his methods and win out for creativity and imagination. Cross’s novel makes a humorous and powerful critical and political comment on contemporary education.

J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books return to the boarding school as the dominant setting for the development of the characters and the adventures. Rowling combines realism and fantasy and the conventions of the school story, with the structure and mores of a “public” school (the pupils are selected by their being young wizards and witches). Here the Gothic and magic are interwoven in a series of books which depict a projected “English” cultural consciousness which leans upon the history of the school story and a projection of what “Englishness” is believed to be like. The readership is sympathetic towards the marginalized and downtrodden, yet heroic, Harry, who will finally win out because he is actually “all powerful.” Harry is an archetypal “English” hero who echoes Tom Brown, Billy Casper, and Gillian Cross’s intelligent, problem-solving young protagonists. Harry is shy, yet brave; downtrodden yet powerful; ethical, kind, vulnerable yet essentially strong and a wizard at what he does! Finally he can do “what he does” because the structuring format of the boarding-school story gives Rowling the devices and the narrative spatial opportunity.

Conventions in children’s literature

From the above discussions it has become evident that children’s literature is a diverse and complex field. In addition to the conventions and characteristics of genre and form which have a commonality with literature for adults, there are the parameters and constructs which are applicable to children’s literature in its own right. Yet beyond children’s literature primarily addressing the child reader and the constructs of the child and childhood, “absolute” conventions defy definition. Perry Nodelman has attempted to elicit such definitions for the field in The Pleasures of Children’s Literature (1992) where he variously nominates characteristics and conventions. However, for each attempt at categorization one can cite texts which break those boundaries of expectation. Nonetheless, Nodelman’s attempt provides invaluable points of reference which encourage interrogation, and help the academic to clarify their positioning towards and understanding of texts and the field. Selected examples from Nodelman’s list demonstrate the complexity of the task.

Perry Nodelman states that children’s literature is “simple but not necessarily simplistic”; “action-oriented rather than character-oriented.” A host of texts ranging from the nineteenth-century to contemporary children’s literature challenge that statement. Lewis Carroll’s Alice texts and Charles Kingsley’s The Water Babies (1863), for example, are multifaceted and sophisticated works which challenge the reader with complex combinations of form and subject matter, where discussion of and challenges to subjectivity, social convention, religion, Darwinism, and the social and political matter of the period are integrated into texts for the child reader. Nina Bawden’s Carrie’s War (1973) is a sophisticated contemplation of the psychological effects on the child of the subject of war, evacuation, dislocation, love, and death. There is certainly action and adventure in these texts, but the pivotal concern is the construction of the child subject. The action and adventure are directed at the exploration and development of the child protagonist and thereby the reader.
Nodelman also nominates “presentation from the view of innocence” and the didactic nature of children’s literature as defining characteristics of children’s literature. These criteria are less open to challenge since the fact that books are written for children by adults means that the child reader is entering into the experience guided by the adult author, so they move from the view of “innocence to experience,” and thus all texts for children are in some way didactic, to a greater or lesser extent. One could, however, conceivably make this argument for literature _per se_.

The criteria which stand out for me in Nodelman’s list are “optimistic and with happy endings,” with the emphasis being on “optimism.” I believe that optimism and hope are key factors in writing for children, whether or no the actual ending is happy in itself. One certainly thinks of the sadness of the death of Charlotte in E. B. White’s _Charlotte’s Web_ (White 1953) which is balanced by the solace and joy Wilbur takes in the next generation of spiders. A novel which stands out as an exception is Gudrun Pausewang’s _The Last Children_ (Pausewang 1988). This is a quasi post-holocaust world where the reader predicts that disease and destruction will finally overcome the remaining children. Pausewang’s text points up the moral and emotional tenor of optimism which dominates writing for children, for if the upcoming generation loses hope, then all is lost.

**Conclusion: children’s literature as part of a cultural system**

In conclusion, the study of children’s literature is to examine, interrogate, and analyse this area of literature employing critical faculties as applied to adult literature, whilst also being aware that this is literature written _for_ children, thereby taking into account Peter Hunt’s call for a “childist” criticism.

It is a centrally important part of the endeavour to understand the cultural systems in which we do, and do not, and could possibly operate. Literature is essential to the well-developed and balanced human subject and to strive through the study of literature is to strive for understanding of the human subject. If we deny the study of children’s literature as a serious academic subject, then we deny a fundamental part of such knowledge. As William Shakespeare succinctly observed, “What’s past is prologue.” All adult writers were children. They are writing from a past and projecting into the future, handing on their knowledge, experience, and vision. I have no doubt, nor do my colleagues in the field, that the academic study of children’s literature has an important contribution to make well into our futures, and into shaping and helping to understand the possible development of the coming worlds.

**Notes**

1. See the National Curriculum Online at: http://www.curriculumonline.gov.uk.
2. In a pressured professional life, the classroom teacher is, understandably, more likely to use that suggested list as “a canon.” See also the associated approved National Curriculum site which provides materials and suggestions for teachers: www.teachit.co.uk/index.asp?m=28a=1.
3. See _The Bookseller_ (http://www.thebookseller.com) for annual publishing figures.
4. Even taking into account population differences, the proportion still emphasizes the paucity of translations into English.
5. P. W. Musgrave gives a clear and extensive discussion of the development of genres (Musgrave 1985).

**Works cited**


Carroll, Lewis. 1865. _Alice in Wonderland_. London: Macmillan.


Further reading


