

Reading children's literature

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This chapter will explore the contribution reading and stories (children's literature) have made to reading, its study, its material world, and the implications for teaching and learning to read with children's literature -particularly picturebooks- at the heart of that practice.

For many artists and authors of children's books such as Maurice Sendak (2011), 'we have created an arbitrary division between adult and children's books that does not exist,' making children's literature effectively 'a lie.' C.S. Lewis felt writers should simply choose children's literature as the best art form for 'something you have to say', and Russell Hoban argued that 'books in nameless categories are needed – books for children and adults together, books that can stand in the middle of an existential nowhere and find reference points.' Hence the recommendation 'AGES: ALL' inside the dustjacket of Jon Scieszka's and Lane Smith's picturebook *The Stinky Cheeseman and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992).

We might agree at least that 'before there could be children's books, there had to be children' (Rowe Townsend 1990). But could it be the other way round? Mitzi Myers (1992) exposed our habitual, cultural conditioning of a liberal, humanist conception of the child as 'not a transhistorical universal body of truth about childhood', but instead a 'tissue of assumptions, preferences and perspectives.' From the C14th story of The Pied Piper of Hamelin to those of the C21st, 'all histories of children's literature have their agendas' (Rudd 2010:6). Children's literature development may be directly linked to the rise of the middle class, 'hung' on threads of 'impossibility' (Rose 1984), given it is adults who produce, publish and criticise it, may carry a certain narrative, dual or open address (Wall 1990) or unique cultural expressions of 'childness' (Holindale 1997). The study of children's literature is necessarily 'messy and complex' because of the 'constructed and constructive definitions of the child' (Rudd 2004:25 in Hunt) and its unequal power relations. Ultimately, all constructs of childness offer contradictory templates for what the child or children's literature might be, from imagined, Romantic innocence to more knowing or dystopian futures. Children or children's literature: it's all made-uppy.

So, what counts as children's literature? Just as with all literature, every possible genre of fiction and non-fiction, poetry, comics, graphic novels, picturebooks, pop-up books and online forms: talking or audiobooks, ebooks, digital augmented reality books, even wider cultural definitions including cartoon, animation, film, video, and so on. As Margaret Mackey pointed out some time ago (2004), the book now sits in a world of competing texts: audio, online, game, TV, film and product proliferation, with attendant creeping copyright issues such as Disney buying, remodelling and owning Winnie The Pooh as a trademark, but Mackey insists that reading and stories still lie at the heart of it all.

Children's literature scholars have struggled hard over decades to establish a field of study in its own right, feeling it ranked second to literary studies: the poor, or younger relation. By

now, many countries can name a Children's Literature Canon with its high art/low art insiders and outsiders. If for critic Fred Inglis, '*Tom's Midnight Garden* or *Puck of Pook's Hill* are wonderful books whoever you are, and that judgment stands whether or not your child can make head or tail of them' (Inglis 1981:7), children's literature is simply aimed at readers, some of whom may be children. Yet there are differences in cultural capital, in that not having read Shakespeare is different to not having read Sendak. Peter Hunt's dry summary is that 'in the Adult world of Canons, the book judges you; in the world of children, you judge the book' (Hunt 2017:18). But perhaps the proletarian accessibility of children's literature comes close to Trotsky's longed-for Revolution in 1924: 'Literature and Art tuned to a different key' (Trotsky 1991:259).

For example, the picturebook *Farmer Duck* (1995) promotes solidarity amongst (animal) workers against an oppressor (farmer), as a playful pastiche. Voted best British illustrated book of 1991 & Smarties prize-winner, it has warmth of style and gentle humour often found in picturebooks for the young reader. Yet *Farmer Duck* is a metalepsis: the trope of a trope, the metonymic substitution of a work already figurative (author Martin Waddell calls it '*Animal Farm* for 5-year olds'). As such, it is an example of children's literature's special contribution of animal story or fable as a 'creativity and criticality genre' par excellence, 'condensing' complex socio-political matters 'to the point of epigram' and, like 'old wine in new bottles,' retaining its original power yet still able to surprise (de Rijke 2014). The book is rich in reader experience, from Waddell's onomatopoeic, suspenseful text: 'They stole down the hall/they creaked up the stairs,' to Helen Oxenbury's quintessentially English farming landscape artwork, including metaphoric front and end papers providing mood, before and after the revolution. It also carries that final irony of George Orwell's *1984* that in remarkably little time, the oppressed become the oppressor. Duck is pictured last directing the harvest from the haycock's top, wing on hip. Will Duck be the next despot?



Fig.1 Helen Oxenbury's end papers to the picturebook *Farmer Duck*

Though the picturebook certainly operates at least 'two semiotic systems simultaneously: the visual and the textual' (Reynolds 2007), David Lewis concluded his study with a plea that 'we ... pay far more attention to the ways in which readers perceive them' (2001 p.129) than the kinds of analysis semiotics provides. Perhaps the picturebook - a genre developed out of children's literature - is the most unique overall contribution to the literary field: attracting artists and writers of extraordinary talent, and frequently 'breaking boundaries'(Beckett

2013). Children's literature has contributed many of its own distinctive experiments in 'innovation, crosswriting and originality' (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2017), pushing the boundaries of avant-garde artwork and book design (de Rijke 2018), and unashamedly taking partisan positions on matters of identity formation and socio-political justice.

Crosswriting, innovation and originality

The best works of children's literature open up reading itself and its unlimited, free forms. As one example, the writer Russell Hoban is read by children and adults across America and Britain, and, given the literary influence his works have undoubtedly had over five decades (not least his first and last novels *The Mouse and His Child* 1967 and *Soonchild* 2012), it is astonishing that so little has been written about his children's literature. Hoban described *The Mouse and His Child* as 'a world-picture that was an attempt to see the thingness of things in a narrow compass, a microcosm. It was published as a children's book, and for the most part, reviewed as such' (Hoban, 1971:13). Scholarly works over decades have continued to focus on this classic work of existentialism to the exclusion of other significant and unique works such as *The Marzipan Pig* (1986). A pig made of marzipan falls behind the sofa and no one notices. He becomes increasingly stale with neglect. "I am growing hard," he said, "And bitter. What a waste of me." A mouse eats the pig, then falls in love with a clock which stops. The mouse too is eaten, by an owl, who then falls hopelessly for a lit up taxi-meter on the London streets. Is this fiction or the Butterfly Effect of chaos theory? A series of absurdist reflections on the interruption and continuation of life and love, *The Marzipan Pig's* approach to misdirected desire and loss reads like a concrete poem, or Gertrude Stein for six-year olds. Fabulous. Hoban can certainly turn a phrase. His ear for word power in dialogue, metaphor and epigram encourage reading and re-reading certain lines and learning them by heart. Gillian McMahan-Hill, attending a writing workshop Hoban gave in 1974, described Hoban's 'careful, realized detail' which she recognized- as a teacher of English Literature- was 'at the root of Blake's belief in the minute particulars, Keats' negative capability, and Hopkins' theory of inscape and instress.' McMahan-Hill defines Hoban's essence better than any critic on Hoban I know, because she wrestles so intimately with his "shorthand" techniques of

...wry brevity and clearly defined, witty perception...His language is essentially to be read aloud: his timing is perfect; his rhythms are meticulous; no word is wasted, no idea over-expressed. It is these attributes which have made the texts for his children's books so distinctive and memorable. (McMahan-Hill, 1976:45-46)

The best writers can often attract the best illustrators: Quentin Blake's drawing for *The Marzipan Pig* has a smudgy, charcoal-like style, suiting the darker tone of the story. Equally, Alexis Deacon's terrifying red-wash scenes of hospital operations for *Jim's Lion* (2003) and pencil drawn shamanistic animals for *Soonchild* (2012) work in powerful counterpoint with the mythic strengths of the text. Hoban has written the gamut: counting books, easy readers, picturebooks, poetry, novels and essays; over seventy books for children in total. Yet his genius is still a kind of close-kept secret.

In fact and fiction, much children's literature defies or crosses generational interest: innovations in the integration of word and image from William Blake's visionary *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789) engraved on steel to Edward Lear's drawings with his *Book of Nonsense* (1846) have led in modernity to fiction crosswriting inspiring hugely successful multi-age media franchises, as with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. Original forms such as the verse novel, from Sharon Creech's *Love That Dog* (2001) to Kwame Alexander's *Rebound* (2018), are growing in popularity and influence, and comics have particular mastery in children's literature: from Europe's *Dandy* and *The Beano*, *Tin Tin* or *Astérix* to Japanese Manga and *Dōjinshi*. Raymond Briggs' comic-strip picturebooks from *Fungus The Bogeyman* (1977) to *Time for Lights Out* (2019) cover high art, snoot, old age and death, Shaun Tan's wordless graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006) the huge complexities of race and migrancy and Brian Selznick's mixed-mode *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007) continually extend subject-matter originality and innovations in form.

These experimental forms often make a deliberate feature of disjunctions, such as M.T. Anderson's dystopian cyberpunk novel *Feed* (2002) or unreliable text and image, such as his *Landscape With Invisible Hand* (2017) picturing life for a visual artist in a future without landscape. Anne Fine's bold coda to *The Tulip Touch* (1996), written in response to the infamous Bulger murder (1993), leaves moral responsibility hanging dangerously open. Chris von Allsburg's picturebook without plot, *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (1984), apparently created by someone who has disappeared, features strange images accompanied by a title and a single line of text, encouraging readers to create their own stories. Tellingly, Disney and C20th Fox acquired film rights to two Von Allsburg picturebooks in 2019. Children's literature has always inspired other media and aimed high: in non-fiction, Antonio Frasconi's *See and Say/Guarda e Parla/Regarde et Parle/Mira y Habla* (1955) series taught simultaneous learning in 4 languages to early readers, and the digital augmented reality book *iExplore: The Brain* (2017) allows a reader to witness science in action by placing a tablet or smartphone near the visual trigger on the page to see which part of your brain is triggered by the activity of reading!

The material poetics of books

Ironically, the digital revolution may have led many of us to notice more about the materiality of the book; or 'the book-as-object' (Chambers 1993:174). Yet children's literature has never lost its preoccupation with the 'thingness' of a book from the start of the avant-garde. A number of poets, artists and writers in Russia under Stalin retreated into children's literature as a less monitored space where they could experiment visually and playfully. It was still a risky business, and many did not survive exile or labour camps. The poet Samuil Marshak, (who created 40 works of children's literature with Vladimir Lebedev drawing on folk traditions radically blended with cubist form and typography experiments) wrote to nonsense poet Kornei Chukovsky 'We both could have perished; the children saved us' (in Rothenstein & Budashevskaya 2013). Chukovsky's own absurdist verse and El

Lissitzky's *A Supremacist Tale of Two Squares in Six Constructions* (1922) are daring precursors to 'uneducational' or 'unreadable', wordless books such as Bruno Munri's *Libro Illeggibile* (1949) made entirely of folds and cuts of coloured paper; all of which inspired my first collaborative picturebook as RebVik:



Fig. 2 Constructivist inspired picturebook *The A-Z of Dangerous Food*

These radical design classics inspired later masterpieces of pop-up paper engineering such as David A Carter's *One Red Dot* (2005), Jonathan Miller and David Pelham's *The Facts of Life* (1984) boasting the only pop-up penis in publication, or Christiane Dorion's *How The World Works* (2010), where hurricanes and the water cycle spring to life off the page, and children read three-dimensionally, interactively, allowing cross-curricular study across Science, History, Geography, all at once. With such a pedigree in design innovation, children's literature often leads the field in experiments with the book's material form such as paratext innovations in Tony Ross's creative typography (for Walliams' *Demon Dentist* 2015), or Shaun Tan's end papers (eg: for *Cicada* 2018).

Partisan positioning to address matters of identity and political justice

'Stories do not help us to live better; they help us understand living better. (Benton & Fox 1985:15). Nikki Gamble's (2019) categories of 'character play' are useful:

- character against self (Max's projected rage producing monsters in Maurice Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are* 1963)
- character against character (Frog continuing to love Duck despite Pig's prejudice in Max Velthuijs' *Frog in Love* 1989)
- character against society (an urban homeless boy in Gregory Rogers *Way Home* 2003)
- character against norms (Bailey, the transboy who 'feels like a girl' in Marcus Ewert's *10,000 Dresses* 2008)

Whoever/whatever depicted, these are quests for subjective agency. Naturally enough, children's literature reflects societal changing gender concerns, waves of feminism and queer theory, such as carnivalizing cross-dressing to destabilise the binary concepts man/woman or gay/straight in Jessica Love's picturebook *Julian is a Mermaid* (2018) or Merey's graphic novel *a+e 4ever* (2012). Here, reading takes a role in identity-formation, exploring questions of affect, subjectivity and identity rights, validating gay parenting in Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell's tale of male penguins rearing a chick, *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) or

understanding of HIV and AIDS in Maurice Gleitzman's novel *Two Weeks With the Queen* (1990). The texts encourage empathetic viewpoints, and, by using the literary devices of parody, metafiction and intertextuality, represent 'queer' subjectivities as dialogically constructed by a variety of social, political and emotional discourses.

Studies on reading for empowerment also suggest oppositional viewpoints, such as technology versus nature, in Jeannie Baker's *Window* (1991) and *Belonging* (2004), or migrant versus native in Armin Greder's *The Island* (2007), multiple social class viewpoint in Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park* (1996), multiple character in Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (1989), unreliable narrator in Lemony Snicket's metafictional *A Series of Unfortunate Events* with its interruptive asides: 'well-read people are less likely to be evil', 'never trust anyone who has not brought a book with them', or Mark Haddon's autistic narrator of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* (2003); all demand transactions with texts as a means of self-cultivation and self-development way beyond functional literacy, and for any reading age.

Learning to read and children's literature

Parallel to the "reading wars" of the US, there has been much political and educational controversy over how to teach reading in the UK (broadly, holistic language experience versus reading or phonics schemes) from the 1950s to the present. The politics of reading over the past thirty years in particular, has become something of a scapegoat for neoliberal policy reforms, increasingly focusing the teaching of reading to standardised national tests and school Ofsted inspections for market comparisons. However, after fifteen years of raising the 'expected standard' for reading, the Ofsted Report *Reading for Pleasure and Purpose* (2004) noted that whilst reading was taught effectively, even competent readers were not being encouraged to read for pleasure. Relatively large scale reviews have taken place to explore and demonstrate the role of reading for pleasure (Clark and Rumbold 2006; National Endowment for the Arts 2007; DfE 2012). In the UK, local libraries are closing and school libraries dwindling as schools prioritise reading scheme sets and subject textbooks rather than works of children's literature, despite Ofsted's own evidence that library membership is positively co-related with reading frequency.

Competitive tension in the school budget has emerged with recent insistence on the need for schools to invest in reading scheme books that support the SSP teaching, that, for the past two decades, the DfE have promoted as the route to learning to read, with the first national test at age 6. In the UK, if a child is not decoding words by the age of 5, teachers and parents start to worry. If schools choose to buy into commercial schemes, it involves thousands of pounds' worth of investment in training and resourcing. How teaching reading balances the respective roles and merits of schemes, textbooks and "real books" has been a fiercely contested debate for the past forty years. Arguments for the best materials being real children's literature in the context of the negative impact of (classified, ranked, labelled) reading schemes on motivation (Smith & Goodman, 2008; Solity & Vousden, 2009)

frequently relate to the use of reading schemes in isolation, and the latest recommendations urge blending real literature with reading scheme and textbooks.

As with schemes, debates have raged for decades around popular writers such as David Walliams, Roald Dahl or Enid Blyton – all of whose literature for children has been criticised for perpetuating race, gender and class stereotypes, thus making them “unsuitable” for child readers. Walliams acknowledges his debt both to working as a comedian and Dahl’s exaggerated grotesque that he relished as a child reader. In a similar spirit, Dahl resigned from the 1988 conservative working group for the English National Curriculum on the grounds that Enid Blyton was not on their list of suggested reading. He knew her books got children reading, as his and Walliams’ books do. The attractions for children of such un-PC literature remain very real: limited vocabulary or narrative structure and exaggerating characterisation might risk stereotype, but also allow for easier reading; children appreciate authors’ playful humour in breaking social taboos (jokes about farts, against authority, etc.) and – as part of some authors’ celebrity reach- children can enjoy a world of supplementary websites, games, TV and film spin-offs; all of which support the reader in feeling successful in the act of reading, forming author affiliations and feeling part of a community of readers.

Children’s literature and reading tests

Matthew Arnold, inspecting elementary schools in 1867, reported: ‘I find in them, in general, if I compare them with their former selves, a deadness, a slackness, and a discouragement which are not the signs and accompaniments of progress.’ This he attributes to the school legislation of 1862. Again, in 1869, he writes: ‘The circle of the children’s reading has thus been narrowed and impoverished all the year for the sake of a result at the end of it, and the result is an illusion.’ Are we –150 years on- building on and repeating worst practice? Children’s authors such as Michael Rosen and Philip Pullman have been lobbying for years to ‘give children books, not SATs,’ arguing that tests limit teaching ruin poetry, deny interpretation and reading for pleasure. As the Grande Dame of reading, Margaret Meek has warned of the negative effects of: ‘Reading and literacy...crammed with the vocabulary of military metaphors ‘strategies’, ‘word attack skills’ (Meek in Kimberley et.al, 1992: 231). This metrics culture, measuring children’s reading in three reductive bands: ‘working towards,’ ‘at,’ or ‘exceeding’ “expected” national levels is all-too-often interpreted as ‘low, middle and top’ groups, sets or streams. The label ‘low ability reader’ evokes Allan Ahlberg’s poem ‘I am a Slow Reader’ (1983) which visually enacts the painfully slow syllabification of words in the decoding process. The poem is a powerful reminder of the negative effect of labelling on motivation for reading, ending with the words ‘I/ hate – it.’

Slow Reader

I - am - in - the - slow
read - ers - group - my - broth
er - is - in - the - foot
ball - team - my - sis - ter
is - a - ser - ver - my
lit - tle - broth - er - was
a - wise - man - in - the
in - fants - christ - mas - play
I - am - in - the - slow
read - ers - group - that - is
all - I - am - in - I
hate - it.



Following numerous reading tests, teachers, schools, districts, regions and countries are then ranked worst to best in literacy, without reminding ourselves that advantage gaps are overwhelmingly the reason (Waldfogel & Washbrook 2010; Cooper & Stewart 2013). Despite the research evidence that disadvantage affects reading more than anything else (Higgins et al. 2014; Save the Children 2014) and reading campaigns arguing that ‘reading can be a way to escape poverty’ (*Read On. Get On.* 2014) it all fails to influence government policy, as libraries close and budgets are cut. What do we even test when we test reading? It’s like trying to explain or test thinking. We could say the very discourse is impoverished.

Reading aloud

‘To learn to read a book... a young reader has to become both the teller (picking up the authors view and voice) and the told (the recipient of the story, the interpreter). This symbolic interaction is learned early. It is rarely, if ever, taught, except in so far as an adult stands in for the author by giving the text a ‘voice’ when reading to the child.’
(Margaret Meek 1970. *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*)

It is purported that three dynamics are among the most powerful predictors of reading frequency for children aged 6-17 years: how often children are read books aloud; children’s reading enjoyment; and knowledge of reading level (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Cooper’s (2009) study of whether ‘reading strategy intervention that targets children’s literature unwittingly interferes with the development of a reading life’ raised the value of the ‘untaught story’ -stories read aloud purely for the story’s sake- in a climate already over-prioritising decoding, comprehension and levelling. Research suggests that reading aloud regularly gives children a ‘head start in life,’ leading to higher reading, maths and cognitive skills (Kalb & van Ours 2013).

Though the National Curriculum for English encourages reading widely across a range of genre including ‘other cultures and traditions’, the UK Literacy Association (UKLA 2004) study of Primary teachers found an over-dependence on a worryingly narrow range of books

and low levels of expertise in reading or using children's literature creatively and proactively. Research into Teachers as Readers (TaRs) by Cremin et al. (2014) emphasised the 'affective impact of reading to 'reassure, to entertain, to bond, to inform or explain, to arouse curiosity, to inspire' (Trelease 2013). Ledger & Merger's (2018) Australian study acknowledged growing 'aliteracy' among the young and found that children themselves wanted to be read to, at home and at school, long after reading acquisition. The UK Egmont Report (2019) concluded: does the curriculum make reading a skill to learn, not something to do for fun? Does increased time on screens mean less time for reading and other activities? Is there a lack of awareness that we need to read to children beyond the point at which the child can read independently?

Reader response theory

Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* (1938) is often cited as the first presentation of reader-response theory, but she differs from her successors -and radically from current policy and testing arrangements- in emphasizing both the reader and the text. Her 'transactional' theory of literature examines the reciprocal nature of the literary experience and explains why meaning is neither "in" the text nor "in" the reader. Each reading is 'a particular event involving a particular reader and a particular text under particular circumstances'. Emphasising the subjectivity of transactions between reader and text, placed on a continuum from 'aesthetic' (reading for pleasure) to 'efferent' (reading for meaning), since Rosenblatt, the use and study of literature has often prioritised the 'author's intentions' -supposing them to have produced the work with an 'implied reader' in mind (Iser 1978). For many, memories of studying literature are bound up with sensing the teacher holds 'one, true meaning' of a text, effectively deskillng pupils to feel stupid when they do not share or find the same meaning. The idea of the 'implied reader' is an important one for children's literature, acknowledged John Stephens (1992), yet he is critical of text-oriented focus as opposed to the socialisation or ideological aspect. Children's literature is particularly prey to this, as a genre aimed at young readers whose approach to literature is (wrongly) assumed to be a kind of benign, passive consumption rather than rigorous analysis, but it is also a genre produced and promoted by publicists, parents, teachers and academics, whose interests may well be economic, didactic, test-led or theory-driven. Peter Hunt's notion of childist criticism (1991) suggesting that adult critics should read, think and write like children has been critiqued as 'appealing but impossible' (Rudd 2010), so where does that leave the reader?

Reading response in school

Larry Sipes & Caroline McGuire argued that all reading responses create opportunities for 'powerful teachable moments' for learning to 'read the world as well as the word' (2006:6). The National Curriculum requires 'positive attitude' for reading, and teachers developing discussion, prediction and inference skills, but, compared to the research field's creative models, there is an overriding emphasis on seeing reading as 'retrieving information.'

Effective readers can read the lines (literal) between the lines (inference) and beyond the lines (interpretation and evaluation) which Barrett's taxonomy of comprehension takes

further, including appreciation (such as emotional response or affect identification). Reader response theory, combined with Vygotskian scaffolding, suggests the guided intervention of an ‘enabling adult’ (Chambers 1993) will support interpretations of text. This may not allow much ‘emotional space’ or account for children’s prior, ‘experiential knowledge’ (Stephens (1992) that Iser argued ‘builds bridges’ to help make sense of text, given, ‘whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins’ (Gamble 2019). The success of guided reading depends entirely on high-quality interactions between teacher and pupils, knowing when and how to intervene, prompt, question and so on. In reality it is a movable feast, from teachers who may not even have read the text themselves making children read entire books aloud in painfully repetitive rotation, to well-judged supported reading, lively comprehension and response discussions (Brooks 2007; Cremin, Bearne et.al 2008). Its success depends on whether teachers read themselves, as Cremin et al’s research has demonstrated (2014). Charitable foundations for promoting children’s literature such as CLPE (The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) can extend teacher’s skills with courses such as *The Power of Reading*.

Visual reading

As reading is a visual skill, do those who teach reading need visual literacy? The invention of the first National Curriculum (1989) could- and should- have included visual literacy skills (de Rijke & Sinker 1996) and recognised the deep potential of the illustration or picturebook as Mervyn Peake did for masterpieces such as *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor* (1939) describing them as ‘revelations to stir the imagination’ (de Rijke & Hollands 2008:242). This requires the nuanced skills of reading visual motifs and metaphoric tropes, until, as the child and tiger speech-bubble-as-picture suggests in Satoshi Kitamura’s *In The Attic* (1984), we are making sense (without print) and still ‘dreaming as we read’ (de Rijke & Hollands 2004:158).



Fig. 3 Satoshi Kitamura’s synaesthesiac speech bubbles from *In The Attic*

We are now in an era demanding transliteracies: the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks is transforming reading. For example, radial eye movements that whip across a screen for computerised browsing or surfing will enhance our skimming, scanning and surface reading skills, our eye for moments of detail rather than linear narrative. Due to speed screen reading, the relative slowness of print reading may feel an unrewarding, frustrating exercise to many. Yet we still talk about what children *watch* rather than read.

A book can stabilize ideas. It can also pry things loose. In John Burningham's *Grandpa*, (1984) every page before this shows the little girl and her Grandfather doing cosy, familiar things together. But he is old and cannot last forever. The genius of the last page is an empty armchair. There is nothing to read in the linear. Radial reading gives her the lack of him and how to face it- his old comfortable green chair, her hard school chair, her bare feet, her thoughtful pose. But spatial reading gives us – the reader- plenty of empty white space to think about what may have happened. Left the room? Gone away? Hospital? Dead?



Fig. 4 John Burningham's absent presence in *Grandpa*

Though much children's literature may be didactic, consoling, or, worst of all, 'cute,' taboo topics such as death have attracted works of such staggering fearlessness as Edward Gorey's *A-Z of Children's Deaths* (1963), Michael Rosen's *Sad Book* (2004), Wolf Erlbruch's *Duck, Death and the Tulip* (2007), or Oscar K's *The Children's Undertaker* (2008).

Reader as Player

In Daniil Kharms' picturebook *Igra [Play]* (1930), children run around their town imagining themselves as a car, barge, plane and a cow...until they actually meet a cow. Which is real? In an essay called 'The Deeper Game', linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice-Heath has claimed:

‘It is in the nature of all play, and most markedly within literacy supports in play, that the linguistic, visual and gestural congruencies, along with the all-important uses of imagination and embodiment, take place in meaningful ways. No strategy of a book illustrator is without purpose, and authors of works for children know that their greatest strength is the ambiguities of language and pictures, allowing imaginations to take their readers to a host of possible interpretations. Children outstrip most adults in their powers to fantasise, parody and riddle in wild and unpredictable directions. It is precisely their engagement in play that fuels the imaginations of the young and that allow them to embody roles they will take on in the future they are learning to project for themselves.’ [Shirley Brice-Heath. *The Deeper Game* 2009]

Though there is a ‘perpetual journey’ in children’s books, Nick Tucker (1981) critiques psychological models of reading that take the form of ‘hunt the symbol’, seeing reading as internalised play, in parallel to child psychologist D.W. Winnicott’s imaginative third area, ‘a sort of mental playground in which makers and readers of stories can operate in relative freedom and security.’ Winnicott’s ‘transitional object’- the space of play as transitional space between the child’s imagination and the real world outside the child- suggests that object play can be an early bridge between self and other, allowing for open, creative interpretation. Michael Benton and Geoff Fox’ use Tolkien’s notion of ‘Secondary Worlds,’ where ‘the trick is to shut out one world to enter another’. The secondary world of reading ‘lies in an area of play activity between the reader’s inner reality and the outer reality of the words on the page’ (Benton & Fox 1990:4-5). For Margaret Meek, ‘the reader has to know the rules of the game’ the book is playing (Meek 1988) and Victor Nell’s (1988) research on ‘ludic reading’ sees ‘pleasurable reading as a form of play,’ taking readers ‘out of themselves;’ crucial for visual attention skills and affective control of reader’s worlds. The Book Trust survey of the C21st ‘new literacy landscape’ (2016) with its diverse platforms for reading in mobile and tablet technologies or gaming, for example, found a need for greater confidence in parents, educators and readers as to how to continue the positive emotional shared engagement of reading aloud together, how to read ebooks (which have multimedia features and different demands), how to avoid passive, inappropriate use or ‘addiction’, and how best to complement print and online reading. Interestingly, no-one in the survey seems to have viewed online reading as play, but, rather, as *alternatives* to (outdoor, toy) play.

CODA: Reading beyond literacy

Change is our earliest teacher, our constant companion, our dearest enemy, our most fickle friend. ...Change is motion and light and fear. Change is the standard and the thing it measures. ... Change is the what and the why of reading.
[Frank Jennings *This is Reading* 1965]

Reading is changing: Alan Liu’s *Transliterations Project* (2008) viewed online reading as both individual but also new forms of social, collective reading; ‘reading as gathering’. Not so much posthumanist as prehumanist, perhaps. Hunter-gatherers; reader gatherers. Lui’s ‘Big Bang’ theory of online reading argues that new reading interfaces will result in an evolution of the nature of reading, interpreting and performing, where reading overlaps with

the actions of modelling, gaming, role-playing, adapting, rendering and simulating. Yet, as early as 1992, Margaret Meek urged us to reconsider, or ‘redescribe [reading] so that the teaching and learning of it does not remain a privileged activity for those who have access to texts and technologies’ (in Kimberley et.al 1992: 226). As privileged, schooled literates, we, the educationalists, are the gatekeepers, she argues. ‘Our eye has to be on the future, but we know that education has a strongly conservative effect.’ (Meek 2000:202).

Neurologically, we know that reading gave our brains ‘extraordinary connectivity’ (Wolf 2009) as it snaps neurons to attention, yet precisely how all the brain’s ‘shadow activity’ (Berns et al. 2013) works in relation to reading and cognition, we are still far from fully understanding. If children’s literature, like any literature, is ‘an exploration of writing, of the problems of articulating a world’, with the reader attempting to ‘capture its force’ (Culler 1977), this power, as Meek long argued, is the defense against being victimized by the reductive power of ‘functional literacy’. Children’s reading competences far outstrip any descriptions of them. When reading with children, ‘we see them doing things that our final expectations- an idea that there’s nothing more to know about reading- have almost blinded us to. They open our eyes again’ (Meek in Kimberley et.al 1992: 233).

Reading in relation to children’s literature can be collective, personal or secret. In his autobiography *Words* (1963), Jean Paul Sartre recalls pretending to be able to read, giving himself ‘private lessons’ and Meek argues readers who share preferences are ‘members of networks... like spies’, or, as with readers gathered round a comic or picturebook, a sociable collective, shared by readers of widely differing abilities at once. A good reader might be one with a growing tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty... knowing ‘texts reveal what we think we have successfully concealed even from ourselves’ (Meek 1970). After all, ‘meanings are for the reader to find, not the storyteller (or teacher!) to impose’ (Philip Pullman, 2001). A good reader shows reading agency: selecting or deselecting their own reading, sharing or stopping, enthusing or critiquing; changing all the time.

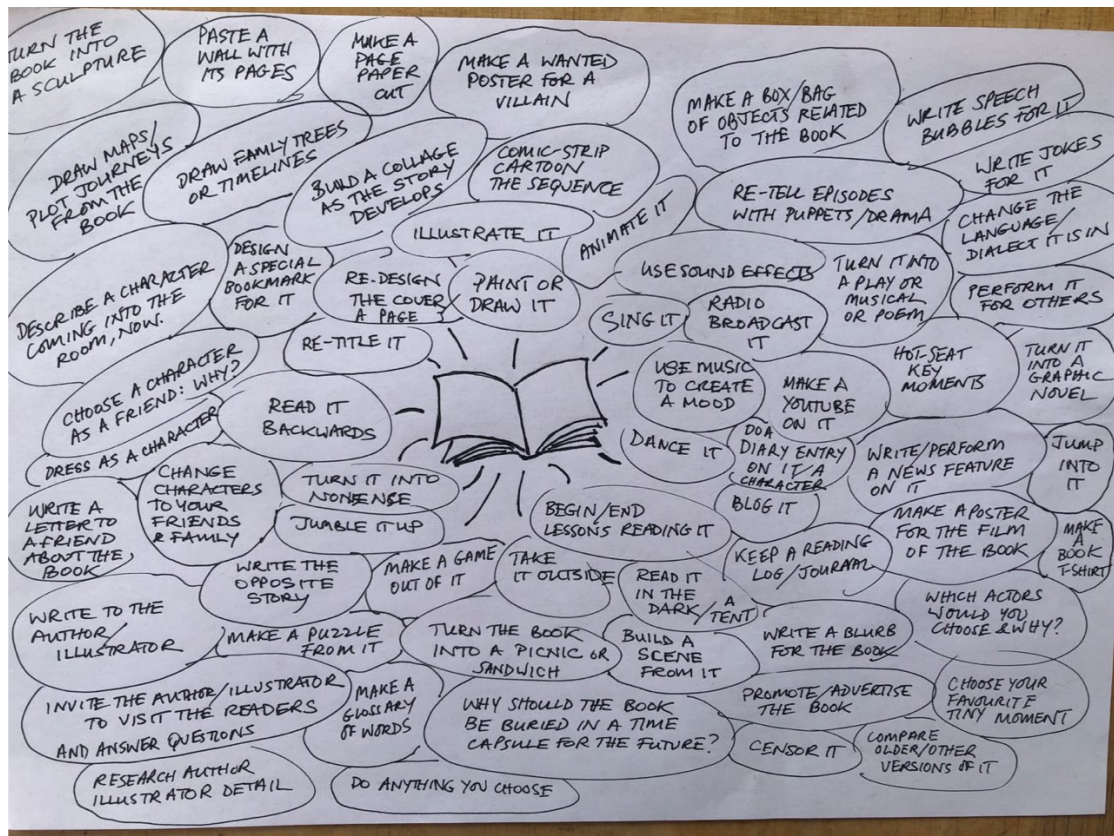
READING IS: seeing (knowing) empathizing, identifying with, sharing secrets or conspiring with, feeling, escaping; giving voice to taboo, trauma, longing, daring, dreaming of how things might be; not being alone; companionship, collaboration, part of the local, global collective; considering agency and what to do with it; playing, adapting, changing.

READING IS NOT: to be confused with literacy, entirely cognitive, alphabetic, phonic or comprehension-based; being tested, measured, graded, grouped, fixed or failed.

READERS NEED TO: be read aloud to (by parents, teachers, audio books, games, apps); enjoy reading as a transitional space between imagination and the real world, play around with spaces/languages/phases/genres for both comfortable and challenging reading, mess about with the materiality of books (see the role of scribbling on them, writing in the margins, cutting them up for collage, playing mis-reading and misinterpretation games), ‘expand notions of reading to include the visual and re-using, refusing the text’ (de Rijke & Sinker 1996), know that any reading is first written by real people with their own values and

feelings, then interpreted by real readers with their values and feelings too, recognise change and agency/citizenship through reading (letters of complaint, blogs, tweets, posters, banners, marches), invent their own titles, lines, images, pages, books, blurbs, reviews, genres, and transform their reading into related, meaningful acts.

Fig. 5 Things to do with a book. [Adapted by the author and students from Benton & Fox as an exercise for teacher trainees and anyone who reads with children]



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