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Exploration

Nicholas Tucker

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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Books published about children's literature up to now have generally concentrated upon only a few possible approaches. There have been a number of very adequate historical surveys of children's literature, for example, while other studies have chosen instead to concentrate on present-day children's books and their authors. Another popular type of study takes a more pedagogic attitude towards this subject by discussing particular ways of getting books across to children, and there are also several good surveys available of what seems to be children's most popular reading-matter at various ages.

All these different approaches can be valuable in their way, and I have learned much from many of them. But in this book I shall be considering instead a different and previously rather neglected topic: exactly *why* are certain themes and approaches in children's literature so popular with the young, and what do possible answers to this question tell us both about children and about many of their favourite books? Can the discovery of common factors in the plots or characters of popular children's books, for example, help reveal recurrent, predictable patterns in children's imaginative needs and interests? Or looking at this relationship from another angle, can various studies in developmental psychology also sometimes explain why some literary approaches have always seemed more acceptable to the young than others?

Throughout this book, therefore, I shall be discussing children's literature in its more developmental aspects, and examining ways in which it grows with and keeps close to children over the years in correspondence with their own changing imaginative and intellectual outlook. In this sense, I shall usually be more concerned with assessing particular books or authors for their potential psychological appeal rather than for their literary merit. Even so, the discussion of the psychological appeal of any particular book often brings one very

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close to making literary judgements too, since literary sensitivity when writing for the young can also be described in terms of the skills with which an author responds to various psychological and imaginative needs within his or her audience. Children, for example, sometimes need stimulation in their literature to help them to move away from certain lazy, immature ways of thinking; a good author, consciously or unconsciously, provides this stimulation by writing about characters and situations in a way that is both fresh and convincing and which, in the light of a child's developing understanding, can also point the way forward towards greater insight. In other moods, however, children may simply want confirmation in their books of certain common, set ways of thinking, and here they often prefer the undemanding fantasies provided for them by literature which frequently has very little literary merit as such, but which I shall also be discussing here.

Trying to discover some of the nature and effects of the interaction between children and their favourite books is by no means easy, though. One simple-minded approach to the problem has always been to ask children themselves through various questionnaires or surveys, what exactly their books mean to them. Turning a powerful searchlight of this sort onto complex, sometimes diffuse patterns of reactions is a clumsy way of going about things, however, and children can be particularly elusive when interrogated like this, with laconic comments like 'Not bad' or 'The story's good' adding little to any researcher's understanding. But this taciturnity is not surprising: as Charlotte Brontë pointed out over a hundred years ago in *Jane Eyre*, 'Children can feel, but they cannot analyse their feelings; and if the analysis is partially effected in thought, they know not how to express the result of the process in words.'<sup>1</sup> A recent, very thorough review of research on children's responses to reading came to the same conclusions. 'If the child is allowed to choose what he wants to read, and allowed further to make his own undirected response to such reading, the nature of that response will be subjective rather than objective – felt rather than thought.'<sup>2</sup>

Attempting to guess at the appeal of any book to children, therefore, will necessitate both psychological and literary detective work, and not a little honest speculation. I shall also be using results from past reading surveys when these seem useful, though, together with autobiographical memories of childhood reading from various sources which can provide the intimate detail missing from more

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impersonal types of discussion. Such memories can sometimes be quite idiosyncratic, but they can also be very revealing when it comes to trying to describe the various emotions occasionally engendered by books at different ages. As I have already said, however, this sort of evidence will also be coupled with a broader discussion of young readers' typical literary preferences drawn from other, less subjective sources. Even so, many of the conclusions I shall be making will have to be tentative, given that individual responses to the experience of reading are often diverse in a way that will always defeat any attempt to be overprescriptive.

The same risk of overstatement must also be resisted when discussing the nature of children's more general emotional and intellectual needs, in so far as these are relevant to explaining certain common preferences for different types of children's literature. Not infrequently, any individual's particular psychological development may not always seem to follow the patterns that psychologists have come to think will be most likely, but here it should be remembered that psychology is always more concerned with probabilities rather than certainties, and so tends to look for *trends* in behaviour rather than for cast-iron rules. There is also the problem, in any book concerned with child psychology, of choosing which psychological theories to follow, given that there are still various quite different ways of looking at things within developmental psychology itself. In my case, however, I shall be guided by two major theoretical approaches, both of which provide explanatory frameworks which have, despite some criticism and modifications, proved generally useful since their inception.

Where children's emotional responses are concerned, I shall be discussing ways in which literature sometimes appears to reflect and relieve various common unconscious or only semiconscious fears and desires whose presence, in the reader, is in my view best explained and described by psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalysts believe for example, that very charged material can often find its way quite safely into fiction when it is suitably disguised from the reader by appearing in make-believe form acted out by different, imaginary characters. In this way, therefore, it need not arouse the anxiety, guilt or denial commonly experienced when individuals are *directly* confronted by various personally taboo feelings or fantasies. But recognition of possible personal meanings and relevancies in certain powerful stories can still occur, it is thought, at an unconscious level.

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Literature that is rich in otherwise suppressed individual fantasies therefore, may often have a strong appeal for particular readers, even though they may not understand what this appeal consists of. In the opinion of Freud, whose own writings on this topic still read well, fiction that allows for the expression of unconscious fantasy in this way acts as a useful safety-valve to the individual. But although I shall be using some of Freud's insights, prospective readers of this book need not fear that they will therefore soon become lost in a forest of symbols. Instead, I shall only be drawing on broad psychoanalytic approaches towards understanding certain strong, sometimes hidden emotions in the reader, and their possible reflection in literature.

While psychoanalytic interpretations of literature have been current for some time, other complementary or contrasting psychological explanations for the appeal of literature have been neglected. Cognitive psychology, for example, has always stressed that the major intellectual task facing children is their constant need to make sense of everything that is happening around them, and here the dominant figure over the last fifty years has been the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget. His approach is also important in explaining the appeal of stories to children. Their fiction, after all, usually portrays a simplified, cut-down version of reality which young minds may find particularly easy to understand, but this is not to say that children necessarily read books chiefly for intellectual stimulation or explanation. In any novel, it is always the story itself that must initially appeal to readers, thereby arousing a curiosity about what is going to happen next that can only be satisfied by getting to the end of the book. But readers will also require a version of events that they can both grasp and sympathise with if a story is going to hold their attention. For this reason the way in which children's literature manages to accommodate itself to various essentially childish modes of comprehension will be one of the main themes of this book.

Although Piaget's work is well known among psychologists, it has had less impact than it deserves in discussion of the reading response, and by drawing freely upon it I hope I can do something to make up for this previous neglect. Even so, the most eminent of psychologists will always have their detractors, and Piaget has at one stage been labelled, by communist psychologists from China, as a 'bourgeois empiricist'. The criticism here is that Piaget only tested and questioned Westernised children brought up in a particular and often

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favourable social and economic climate; his results, by this argument, could hardly be termed a universal psychology of childhood.

It is strange that Piaget has been picked on in this way, since his work – more than most – has led to an enormous amount of cross-cultural psychological research, much of which has corroborated his original theories. It is true, however, that Piaget has always been most interested in discovering the intellectual *strategies* that individuals at various ages have in common, when it comes to trying to understand the total environment in which they find themselves. But the analysis of how different environmental or personality factors may then affect the development of particular ideas or attitudes arising from such common intellectual strategies, has never been his special concern. For example, Piaget describes – as we shall see – all young children as going through an omnipotent, egocentric stage, where they think the world revolves around their every wish. At the same time, they tend to see the workings of the universe in terms of what Piaget has described as ‘immanent justice’, whereby everything is thought to work out according to sound moral law, with rewards for the good and punishment for the bad.

There has been plenty of experimental work since supporting these broad conclusions, but it has, on the whole, been left to other psychologists to point out that harsh reality, or indeed the typical thought-patterns of certain cultures, can sometimes put a stop to such amiable fantasies much sooner in the case of some children than others. An American psychologist Jerome Bruner, for example, has recently drawn attention to what has been called ‘the culture of poverty’, where those born into an economically and socially deprived society may soon cease to view life in such a purposive, patterned way. Instead, they may quickly come to share the prevailing, depressed view of many of those around them, where individual success is seen more in terms of sheer luck than as having anything to do with particular effort – a typical attitude of personal impotence produced by overwhelming economic and environmental disadvantage.

This gap between common intellectual strategies, and cultural or individual expectations which may differ widely from each other, obviously makes it impossible to try to describe anything like a universal literary response, so far as the possible personal ramifications for each individual are concerned. In this book, however, and following Piaget, I shall chiefly describe the more typical ways in which

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children seem to approach and make sense of their stories at various ages, leaving particular details – of how individuals or whole cultures can then sometimes react to such stories quite differently – to one side. But although responses to literature will always differ in some ways, there will be times as well when regular and fairly predictable similarities in reactions to certain aspects of fiction can tell us a good deal about both people and books. Apart from what Piaget has to suggest on this score, it is also true that all human beings seem to respond to certain similar fantasies, which find echoes in literature throughout the world. The existence of archetypal plots and fantasies in literature, therefore, argues for some sort of uniformity in what can best capture and spur on the imagination, and when such themes also occur in children's literature, I shall sometimes try to provide possible reasons for their particular appeal. Where any more specific claims about the interaction of literature and children are concerned, however, I have confined my argument in this book to British children's literature, and its likely readers both now and in the past. What overlap or divergence such reactions may have with children's typical responses from quite different cultures though, is a question which must be left for another type of study.

There is also another possible charge of 'bourgeois empiricism' that could be levelled against anyone like myself who tries generalising about children's responses to literature. Since children's books are written, published and very often purchased by adults, how can one be sure that one is not describing an interaction with literature that children merely get to like, rather than like to get? Anyone at the time who tried to describe children's literary preferences in the early nineteenth century, for example, could say little about the popularity of limericks, because Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* had yet to prove that such popularity actually existed. Can one be sure that one's own literary establishment will not also produce new material one day that will prove very popular, and to that extent help lead to new theories, or at least to some modification of older ones, on why certain books can so quickly become favourites with so many children?

This argument could certainly prove dangerous for critics who generalise only about respectable children's literature, where adult influence has always been fairly evident and sometimes obtrusive. But if any discussion also includes popular literature for children, such as nursery rhymes, fairy stories and comics, as I have tried to do

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here, then the results should give some idea of what children have always seemed to like, very often despite rather than because of adult approval. At the same time, the last hundred years has seen a general liberation of children's literature from much of its old, semi-pedagogic role, and sometimes popular books for children this century have been almost as disliked by adults as they have been welcomed by most young readers. Continuing adult attempts at interference, however, have on the whole not been successful; although the works of Enid Blyton, for example, have been banned from more public libraries over the years than is the case with any other adult or children's author, she still remains very widely read.<sup>3</sup> So while one can never be certain that there are no more developments in children's books just around the corner to reveal some new dimension to young readers' imaginative needs, one can – by sticking to tried favourites – be fairly sure of generalising about fiction that has already proved its popularity with a great many children.

As it would have been impossible to try to analyse the appeal of every favourite book or comic for children, however, my final choice of fiction to discuss has been somewhat arbitrary. I have, though, tried to deal mainly with books representative in various ways of the different fictional genres that have always seemed popular with children, written by authors drawn from the living and the dead but with the emphasis equally on best-sellers from the immediate and occasionally the more distant past. This is not simply because I once used to enjoy such books myself and so have some direct experience of their appeal, though this may have something to do with it. There is also the point that former best-sellers that continue to attract young readers today obviously must have a popularity that transcends temporary trends, and therefore have something worth discussing in more detail here. Some of the novels written for children now will also one day be seen as classics for their time and continue to win new readers. But because one can never quite tell which of them are going to remain of permanent interest, I have accordingly usually decided to stick with tried and tested books, even when they sometimes now seem rather dated. There are other ways, too, in which I have been forced to limit my discussion of the otherwise vast and sprawling field of children's literature, when it is taken as a whole. Apart from nursery rhymes, for example, I shall not be discussing the appeal of poetry nor that of general non-fiction. In fact, poetry is sadly little read by children today, and while non-

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fiction can sometimes be very successful with young readers, 77 per cent of them, according to Schools Council researches, still prefer reading fiction, which is why I have chosen it as the best potential area for any examination of overall imaginative responses to literature.<sup>4</sup>

There is, however, another type of potential ambiguity intrinsic to any discussion of this whole topic, including my own, and this arises over the precise definition of what we choose to term as 'children's stories', and whether they can always be easily distinguished from so-called 'adult fiction'. Although most people would agree that there are obvious differences between adult and children's literature, when pressed they may find it quite difficult to establish what exactly such differences really amount to. Adult books, like the novels of Ian Fleming, are often read by children, just as grown-up readers may sometimes want to turn again to classics like *The Wind in the Willows* or *The House at Pooh Corner*. There are also books, from *Alice in Wonderland* to the sagas of Tolkien or Richard Adams, which have always attracted a wide readership from the moment of publication. Could it therefore be that there are no valid differences between children's and adults' literary taste and that children's literature as such is an artificial device thought up by adults more or less to keep the young in their place?

There is an element of truth in this sort of assertion, but not much more. Certainly, adults do not always want to read books that take full account of their maturity, and there is much written for them that appeals, and always has appealed, to children as well. Attempting to discourage children from occasionally reading this sort of adult literature can often be a quite mistaken policy. Equally, mature readers who somehow feel inhibited by age from trying authors who write ostensibly for a younger audience, may find themselves missing a whole range of literature which would once have been enjoyed by adults, but which now, for reasons of literary convention, has become unfashionable for older readers. In this context, it has sometimes been said that if Malory or Dickens were alive today, they would probably be writing for children, so preoccupied has the adult reading market now become with fiction that thrives on the close study of personal relationships in preference, say, to epic or picaresque forms of literature.

Even so, while some common ground exists between adult and child reading, just as it does when it comes to watching popular pro-



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grammes on television, there are also distinctive differences between the reading needs of the young and old, and therefore between the types of literature they get. Adult readers may not always, or indeed ever, wish to read up to the level of their intelligence or experience, but so long as they have the potential for doing so, some of them will require literature which lies beyond the intellectual and emotional grasp of a child. In the same way, children may sometimes want literature that is so simple that none but the most determinedly regressive adult reader would ever find it satisfying; it is rare, for example, to see any grown readers still enjoying Enid Blyton's *Little Noddy* stories.

Beyond such extremes, however, there are also other differences between the literary tastes and needs at least of experienced adult readers and those of the average child. Where intellectual skills are concerned, for example, children – crudely defined here as those beings between school age and puberty, so omitting babies and older teenagers from the argument – will prefer books that deal with concrete events rather than with abstract discussion, and which have an emphasis upon action in preference to introspection. At the same time, such action must then be treated in ways that do not make too many demands upon still immature intellectual skills. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that ‘The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still maintain the ability to function’, and Piaget would probably agree from his own researches, which suggest that this ability is altogether too difficult for children up to the age of seven or so, and after that only in a context of thinking about actual, concrete objects. The next stage, when it is possible to hold two contradictory, abstract ideas together in one concept, such as the notion of a good–bad character, or an act that may be both positive and negative in its implications, will generally have to wait until most children are at least around the age of eleven.

It follows, therefore, that younger children will not on the whole welcome ambiguity in their literature. The type of moral judgement they can most easily share and understand will tend to praise or condemn characters for their surface acts alone, without wanting to consider more subtle explanations, either in terms of motivation or else in the suggestion of an altogether more complex scale of values. Older children, it is true, eventually get past this particular stage of making very simple, absolute moral judgements, but usually arrive at

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an only slightly more complex level, where conventional morality will still be preferred to more radical ideas that sometimes challenge tradition and the majority view.

A young audience, therefore, always has a tendency to go in for snap moral judgements, often based upon preconceived, immediate emotional reactions towards certain acts or situations and this, in turn, limits a children's author in any attempt to develop a more complex view of things. Instead, there may be pressure to simplify causal connections, substituting in part a more predictable, morally coherent world picture for the confusion of reality itself. This is something that a great writer like Tolstoy could refuse to do, for example in his deliberately inconsequential descriptions of the battle scenes in *War and Peace* (where he seems to have followed the advice of the Duke of Wellington, who warned his contemporaries not to write about Waterloo since he personally did not know what had really happened there, and was sure that no one else did). In fact, one of the appeals of fiction for all ages is that it can present the reader with a pattern of events that is in itself more comprehensible than the jumble of happenings that seems to make up real life. But while Tolstoy or Henry James can write for an audience capable of understanding the necessarily indeterminate complexity of much human experience, a children's writer will usually have to offer a more comprehensible world of cause and effect, simplified towards a minimum of explanation.

Writing of William Cobbett's return from his first trip in America, Chesterton describes his hero's 'terrible discovery that terminates youth, even if it often gives a new interest to life: the discovery that it is a strange world, that things are not what they seem and certainly not always what they profess to be'.<sup>5</sup> Before reaching this particular stage of knowledge, however, children will tend to see the workings of the universe and of human affairs in terms of what seems to them like good, common sense and an overall moral coherence. This is not to say that they want all their stories to end happily, although this is often the case. Rather, there is a strong wish, usually reflected in children's literature, that stories should always be quite clearly rounded off, with justice more or less seen to be done, even if this works against characters with whom children may generally sympathise. One reason, perhaps, why younger readers often find *Alice in Wonderland* rather frightening could be because of its moral anarchy, where events are always so arbitrary and unpredictable.