

Children's Literature and the Inner World, 2nd National Centre for Research in Children's Literature Conference, University of Roehampton, 12/05/2012

Following a heavily philosophical day and a meeting a new crowd in Nottingham on the 11th, it was good to slip back into the literary and to see some familiar faces at Roehampton.

After catching up with a few of these, and loading up on coffee and pastries, the day opened with a talk from Roehampton's own Alison Walker entitled 'Inside the Young Adult Brain'. Using three science-fiction texts which focus upon an adolescent mind being influenced by external forces (M. T. Anderson's *Feed*) or removed from its original body (Peter Dickens' *Eva* and Mary E. Pearson's *The Adoration of Jenna Fox*), Walker set out to explore the relationship between science and literature, philosophical conceptions of consciousness and memory, and the literary representation of the inner working of a young adult mind. Making continual references to the findings of modern neuroscience, literary criticism, as well as philosophers such as Descartes and Gilbert Ryle, Walker also unpacked our intuitive reactions of horror and intrigue to these texts. Perhaps most relevant for me, however, was the notion of literature as extended thought-experiment that seemed to be an undercurrent to much of what was being said.

Second was David Rudd's talk which based itself on the infamous Möbius strip (see opposite) – an image that recurs in children's literature, whether it is in Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* or Michele LeMieux's *Stormy Night*. Indeed, the Möbius strip became something of a conference theme as it was brought up in both the later workshop I attended and the final talk of the day. Rudd's talk was a veritable bombardment of puns and psychoanalysis. The ceaseless movement and sense of endlessness to the possibilities of his analysis seemed to perfectly reflect the powerful paradox and nature of the Möbius strip itself. I felt adrift amongst a sea of ideas and concepts that I had never come across or considered before, and whilst lost I felt that every word made sense. Whether this is down to Rudd's capabilities as a speaker or that some will-o-the-wisp truth was present throughout his talk I do not know. In general, however, it was this boundary between realism and fantasy that Rudd teetered upon and played with in his talk through an analysis of such texts as Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and Anthony Browne's *Zoo*.



After lunch we separated for some parallel workshops – I chose to attend 'Interiority and Children's Reading'. The first speaker was Jeffry Canton who presented on 'A Childist Approach to Reading Children's Literature'. His talk centred upon a book that neither he nor I can recommend highly enough: Peter Hollindale's *Signs of Childness in Children's Books*. It is this childness that so interests Canton, and the related questions of how we represent to children a relatable and engaging childhood, how we might engage with children as beings-in-their-own-right, and why we must not underestimate not only their ability to think critically or deeply but also their ability to do this *alone*. Canton drew upon Jane Teller's

Nothing and Michele LeMieux's *Stormy Night* to present to us what he believed to be exemplary qualities of childist texts.

The second workshop presentation was Margot Stafford's 'Beauty and the *My Book House* Home Library: Childhood Reading as Interior Design'. Her discussion focused upon how aesthetic theory was applied to the creation of a 'childhood library' in the *My Book House* series. The books that contributed to this collection were selected and designed in order to instil in the child a good sense of taste. By being around and owning such beautiful things, the child could supposedly grow up with a correct and well-developed sense of the beautiful and good. Nowadays, Stafford argued, the idea of having a beautiful home has become inextricably linked with consumerism. We do not have a beautiful home or objects in order to bring about a good sense of taste, we instead present that we have a good sense of taste through buying a beautiful home. This collection was not just for childhood however, its beauty was also meant to shape a space that could be returned to as the reader aged.

We then came back together as a group for coffee and the final talks. Farah Mendlesohn gave a presentation meant to provoke us into thinking about what we mean by a 'child'. In our professional work, she argued, we often label and categorise children. Thus, we lose the individual and their personality amongst an almost breed-like classifying of character types. Not only are all of these categories fantasies, however, but they are based only on one way of interpreting data – they find the average subject and make generalisations. We are perfectly entitled to and *should* use the anecdotal evidence of an individual, however, provided we recognise it as such and draw upon *all* the anecdotal evidence. We should move from "This is what a child wants" to "This is the range of what children want". The latter may well be more difficult to wield, but that simply reflects the true complexity of the matter. The fact is we can never know another's inner self, they, and we, are *all* characters, constructs, and fantasies, always incomplete. It is only when we accept these facts that we can move away from the questions we have been asking, that have led us to such alienating generalisations, that we can start asking a new set of questions – questions yet to be determined.

Philip Gross rounded off the day by speaking about his creative work with young people. It was refreshing to finish upon a practical note, and he wove together readings of his own poetry and children's with his first-hand experience and theorising. The main drive of his presentation came from his discussion of borders and margins. It is along these borderlines and beyond the edge of margins that we find creativity. Indeed, it appears as if boundaries and borders are something necessary to creativity for Gross, at least insofar as he defines creativity not as simply inventing something new, but as any step over the border that exists between the real and the made-up in a way that increases our options – preferably in unexpected ways. Creativity isn't an unconditionally good thing though, borders and boundaries often have a habit of being risky, uncertain, sometimes dangerous places, but the upshot of this is that creativity is a site of individual and social learning and expansion. It is this creativity, this exploration of boundaries, which lies at the heart of much of Gross' work with young children as he presents to the child the option of being an active co-creator of their own lives and works. He made reference to one particular game he enjoys using with

them. You present the child with the description of the outside of a box and get them to fill it. For in this creation there is reflected much of what a child, all of us in fact, spend a lot of our time doing: looking at the outside of the box that is the adult or the other and inventing what's inside.

The day finished with a short tribute to the great Maurice Sendak who died on 8/05/2012 aged 83 – RIP.