

NCRCL, PhD Research Day, Roehampton University, 27th June 2012

This PhD day was another great opportunity to get together with the groups from Cambridge, Roehampton, and elsewhere, to hear more about what everyone is working on. The layout of these research days has meant that I have been introduced to a wonderful variety of topics and areas of study, and this event was no different.

The day opened with two of Roehampton's current PhD students presenting on their areas of interest and research.

Nick Campbell is doing his PhD on the archaeological imagination in neo-romantic adventure stories for children and he presented us with his explorations of Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* and John Gordon's *The House on the Brink*. He mainly focused upon the place of misrepresentation and misinterpretation when 'discovering' or 'awakening' things from the past. These novels have a tendency to leave questions as to origins of mysterious artefacts or objects open and ambivalent. It is this misreading of origins and explanations that is at the heart of these novels' ultimate exorcisms of whatever has been disturbed or awakened – the misunderstanding must be purged. This desire, conscious or otherwise, to uncover truth or, at least, misunderstanding is also driven by the relationship between childhood and nature. It is the move from the child (or the adult or archaeologist) simply being in and part of the natural world to becoming part of an active and investigative relationship that is central to many of the events in these texts.

We then heard from Laura Gaudino on Italian children's literature from the 1920s and 30s. Under the fascist regime that gripped Italy during this period, the country was being presented with a new vision of the child as an adventurous, patriotic war hero, and the regime attempted to use children's literature to build a child culture based around "Italian faith and pride". However, some of the literature of the period remained subversive and satirical, and it is with this in mind that Gaudino presented to us her thoughts on Massimo Bontempelli's *The Chess Set in the Mirror*. This novel exhibits many of the key features typical of the period's subversive children's literature: magic realism, room for interpretation, use of irony and carnival imagery, and sincere empathy with the child's needs and desires. On the basis of such novels, an image different from the regime's child emerged. One that presents childhood as a meditative and inquisitive condition, focused upon the search for identity and the acquisition of confidence and self-awareness. This is an image that actually exposes the weakness, limits, and legitimacy of the author and society.

After coffee, we were given three presentations based upon the nature of archival research. The first two presentations were given by Jenny Kendrick and Judy Bainbridge who are nearing the end of their PhD studies. They shared with us the woes and joys of trawling through archives. Kendrick is researching equine literature for children in the period between *Black Beauty* and post-war pony stories, and she has often been faced with the challenge of how to find forgotten books. Bainbridge then spoke of the pleasures of searching through archives for letters and accounts from children and teachers of the early nineteenth-century

that could give her an insight into her subject matter (representations of schools and schooling in this period). These archives, she said, gave to her a “direct, uninterrupted relation to the past.” Sarah Lawrance from the Seven Stories museum in Newcastle then spoke to us about their archives, which are mainly writings or author/illustrator notes from the 1930s to today. They have manuscripts, artwork, and much more from even the most contemporary of writers which offer a thrilling insight into the mind of the author. Indeed, Lawrance wanted to emphasise what Bainbridge had just said about the “magical value” of handling these documents and the association you then feel to the work.

After lunch there were two more presentations from current PhD students. Karen Williams first spoke to us about satire for children in the early nineteenth-century. She told us of her surprise when her own research revealed so much humour in a period typically known for its Evangelical and moralistic writing. She pointed mainly to a group of works known as the ‘papillonades’ (esp. 1807-1810, inspired by William Roscoe’s *The Butterfly’s Ball and the Grasshopper’s Feast*). These texts are aimed at children and seem to satirise high-society. Yet, Williams said, they also remain very ambiguous as to just how satirical they are in many places. There often seems to be the option of reading a passage as both re-enforcing hierarchical society and satirising it. She finished with the intriguing question: *if* these texts *are* intended for children then what does that say about how the child is being envisioned given the ambiguity and subtlety of the satire?

The second afternoon presentation came from Simon Machin. His talk centred upon the psychological complexities of the “ripping yarn” for children and their authors. Machin displayed a clear wealth of knowledge when it came to the biographical nature of these authors. This presentation focused mainly on Rudyard Kipling though, and perhaps the most poignant message for someone studying children’s literature was the Kipling quotation he finished with: “the tales had to be read by children before people realised that they were meant for grown-ups.”

After these presentations came something a little different – a look into the future. Two of Roehampton’s MA students who were either preparing to apply for or thinking about PhDs presented us with their thesis ideas.

Erica Gillinham first talked about her proposal to study gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, trans-gender, and queer primary characters published in English-language works between 2000 and 2012, and to discuss what is being communicated in these works and how they affect the real-world reader. She wished to return the “love” to the critical study of these characters and genre. This, Gillinham feels, is something that has been lost.

Sinead Moriarty then presented her proposal to analyse character interaction with landscape in Irish travel literature for children. This genre, Moriarty argued, seems to challenge many of the tropes found in English travel and adventure writing, such as the planting of the flag, and instead displays an obsession with the *re-taking* of land, the romanticising of landscape, and the *necessity* of travel rather than a *want* to travel. These alternative focuses have formed a

different version and vision of land for children depicted in and reading this genre, and Moriarty wishes to examine just how contemporary Irish children are taught to view their home and land with this heritage in mind.

I look forward to next year and hearing just how these intriguing topics, whether from current or aspiring PhD students, have grown.