Harry Potter and the Novice’s Confession

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My parodic title does not signal any religious calling on my part; rather, it points to my novitiate readerly status vis-à-vis the burgeoning (literary and critical) field of children’s literature. As both a scholar and a reader, I’m totally new to this field. I know only the fragmentary particles of this narrative. A brief bit of biography by way of explanation and, I hope, exculpation: as a child (of immigrant Italian parents), I was not read to; nor did I read much at home. By the time I hit my teens, I had discovered the library, but my reading was more Charles Dickens than Nancy Drew. Much to my Italian parents’ dismay, I didn’t have children, so I didn’t read to anyone either. Deirdre Baker would say that is no excuse, and she is right. But it might help explain why I am such a novice. Mea culpa.

My first introduction to children’s literature came about a decade ago with the work of Priscilla Galloway, my former high school English teacher, who had gone on to become the prize-winning author of dozens of books for the young reader. But aside from her works, I had read no others . . . until Harry Potter. My motivation for venturing where no muggle should dare to go was academic curiosity: I found, in the American journal known as the Chronicle of Higher Education, the name of a certain J. K. Rowling on the list of what American college students were voraciously reading and I was intrigued. That curiosity was immediately reinforced by the reading habits of my two young nephews in England who demanded that their literature-professor-aunt discuss the Rowling books—and films—with them.

I further have to confess that I once sneaked a peak at a book I bought for my goddaughter by someone called Lemony Snicket and enjoyed the peak enough to devour the book, giggling helplessly at its literary allusions and parodies. Philip Pullman came next—and only a few years ago—because a graduate student in an opera course wanted to do an essay on the stage adaptation of His Dark Materials as postmodern Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. So, until one day last summer, when Deirdre loaded me...
down with a wonderful bag of books, that was the pitiable but full extent of my engagement with children’s literature. Once again: mea culpa.

Why has it taken so long for me to catch on to this literature? I suppose I might argue that the canonizing *Norton Anthology of Children’s Literature* didn’t appear until 2005, but surely there were academic articles I could have read? Yet I didn’t; I missed them. Was it because, as people like Jack Zipes and Jerry Griswold (238) have argued, experts in this field have published almost always in specialist journals—driven there by exclusion from mainstream academic publishing venues? (Can it really be true that the journal called *Children’s Literature* was initially called *The Great Excluded*)? Things are changing, though—as is testified to by that *Norton Anthology* and by the recent article by Laurie Langbauer appearing in nothing less than the canonical and mainstream journal *PMLA*. And that article is on the ethics of Lemony Snicket. As that topic suggests, it’s not that children’s literature has not dealt with the major concerns and interests of our world. That can’t be my excuse. It has never been afraid of big topics, from wife and child abuse and murder (think of Hadley Dyer’s *Johnny Kellock Died Today* or Tim Wynne-Jones’s *The Boy in the Burning House*) to sexuality and gender identity (in the works of Julie Anne Peters or in Martha Brooks’ *Mistik Lake*) and, well . . . the list of issues Philip Pullman alone has tackled would have to include religion, scientific research, war, individual responsibility and agency . . . you name it.

I confess—yet another mea culpa—that I deeply regret that it has taken me this long to realize that I could have studied (and taught) all the things I did study (and teach) in my entire career using the vast and rich corpus of children’s literature. For example, instead of studying the work of John Fowles to explore narrative self-reflexivity and metafiction, I could have studied Phoebe Gilman’s book *Something from Nothing* or the work of Cornelia Funke. Even if I don’t quite buy theorist Julia Kristeva’s notion that self-reflexivity or self-consciousness define the adolescent novel, I know that *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, not to mention Harry Potter’s adventures, could have taught me a lot about narrative self-consciousness, about how narrative-about-narrative works. Instead of selecting *Don Quijote* to teach in a recent course on narrative, I could have investigated with my class the forms of the picaresque through Sarah Ellis’ *The Several Lives of Orphan Jack*.

I spent many years exploring the tricky literary joys of parody and irony. And I now know that rather than burying myself in art films, I could have enjoyed *Sesame Street*. I should have known this, because I did know Priscilla Galloway’s collection called *Truly Grim Tales* and they taught
me as much as Umberto Eco’s adult novels ever did about how serious a form of cultural critique parody could be. Galloway’s retold tales purport to tell us what the “grand old stories” (ix) left out or were unaware of: things like maternal sacrifice—“The Good Mother” of the title of the rewrite of “Little Red Riding Hood” is not the little girl’s mother, but the “great beast” that terrifies her. In Priscilla’s hands, “Cinderella” gets a queer parodic rereading, and we learn why Snow White’s evil stepmother became evil. Children’s literature is obviously full of this kind of thought-provoking and simply provocative parody, but there are also simply wonderfully, amusing ones: Astérix is a comic version of Odysseus, living by his wits, going on adventures and then coming home to get rid of the enemies trying to take over his land (Bell 135).

I wish I had realized earlier what one astute reviewer put this way: “Who knew that kid lit and postmodernism would make such a cozy fit?” (Paurich). It wasn’t just the parody and the metafiction that ran amok in children’s literature, though, that would have taught me so much on this topic. My interest in postmodernist art’s mixing of the visual and the verbal could have been deepened by looking at what children’s picture books have to say and teach about this relationship. Since these illustrated works create their multiple meaning through the interaction of words and images—and most importantly, through what have been called the “tell-tale gaps” (Collins 148) in both media that readers have to fill in—I could have approached the question of readerly pleasure from a very different angle than I did. I also might have understood better, with the help of Jack Zipes, why postmodern writers like Angela Carter often rewrote folk or fairy tales: she obviously knew what I did not—and that is: these narratives are intrinsically subversive. Mea culpa.

I could go on and on with this list of areas I’ve worked in where my research would have been enriched by my knowledge of the teachings of children’s literature—areas like postcoloniality and multiculturalism. Clare Bradford has just published a book of postcolonial readings of children’s picture books, novels, and films that is wonderfully named Unsettling Narratives. In it, she studies how these works position their young readers and viewers from settler colonies like Canada as citizens of postcolonial nations. And as books like Mavis Reimer’s recent collection called Home Words suggest, children’s literature in Canada (as elsewhere) confronts head on the issues of nationhood, race, ethnicity, and belonging. But I’m going to stop my compulsive listing and linger on one area, one of the richest and the one I have worked on most recently: adaptation. I wish I had read what I’ve now read when I was writing my last book that tried to theorize this ubiquitous yet denigrated aesthetic form.
The term *adaptation*, as we use it today in the arts, the humanities, and even the social sciences, is a borrowing from post-Darwinian biology where mutation and replication drive evolution (see Bortolotti and Hutcheon). In other words, we often use it as an analogy for not only cultural but also social change. Children’s novels are often about adapting to life (and death—especially of a parent), whether you are Harry, son of James Potter, or Kip, son of Tristan Coulter (in Sarah Ellis’s *Odd Man Out*) or Matt, son of Chief Sailmaker Cruse (in Kenneth Oppel’s *Airborn*). Children’s stories are often also about adapting to a new world (not only fantasy worlds like Cittàgazza or the Shire, but, say, Ottawa, after the more familiar Vancouver or England in Tim Wynne-Jones’ *Rex Zero and the End of the World*).

But it is narrative adaptation that I think could be most fruitfully studied using the children’s literary corpus, since so many books have been made into films and stage extravaganzas, not to mention videogames. An adaptation of various Dr. Seuss works called *Seussical: The Musical* just opened off-Broadway last summer. (An earlier, more over-the-top version by the same name flopped on Broadway in 2000–2001.) Many other picture books have been made into animated films, of course. William Steig’s elegant and funny cartoons and fairy-tale parodies have become the DreamWorks’ film we know as *Shrek*—which in turn visually parodies Walt Disney films, which since the late 1930s, have been busily adapting familiar stories for the screen. In fact, for at least one generation of children, *The Jungle Book* is the 1967 Disney cartoon, not a collection of stories by Rudyard Kipling, even if the film opens with an image of the book (Newton). These children experience the book, if read after the film, as the second text, as (in a sense) the adaptation.

It’s no secret that more children’s books are borrowed and sold after an adaptation has appeared—and that this continues over the years, since DVD and video sales keep the story alive. But financial advantage isn’t the only motivating factor for adapting children’s literature to other media. If we remember that one of the earliest literary adaptations to film was Cyril Hepworth’s 1903 eight-minute silent film of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, we might agree with those who claim that children’s literature as a cultural form has a historically long and perhaps even a special relationship with adaptation, which may explain why it is so frequently “mediated and recontextualized through film, theatre, television, radio and other more recent technologies such as the audio cassette, computer games and CD-ROM” (Collins and Ridgman 9). It is argued that “the rules of the game in children’s literature and the carnivalesque endlessness of its imaginative possibilities put it in close touch with the popular media” (Collins and Ridgman 10). But adult literature had been adapted
into children’s literature too, and that dimension should not be lost in our focus on adaptation across media.

But what gets adapted (and why) when children’s literature moves from one page to another or from the page to the stage or screen (movie, TV, or video screen)? Sometimes it’s familiar stories that get adapted—not only because they are familiar, but because they should be familiar. Priscilla Galloway once explained to me that one of her motives for writing the Tales of Ancient Lands series she created was “salvaging”—someone had to save these stories before children (who became adults) forgot about them forever. So her 1997 illustrated book (with Normand Cousineau) called Daedalus and the Minotaur both retells the tale we know from Apollodorus, Ovid, and Pausanius and makes some changes, changes that teach children about toleration, love, and disability. As she puts it in the epilogue, “My recreation shows events and people from the old story in new guises, and puts flesh on old bones, though I like to believe myself true to the ancient tale” (103). In another book in the series, Atalanta: The Fastest Runner in the World, she retells the triumphant story of the Greek girl once sadly abandoned on a hillside to die in such a way that explains to a modern young person why the ancient Greeks might have done something that seems as barbarous as this abandonment does to us today. The Greeks, in her words, “told stories to explain their world. Greek stories interpreted the people’s feelings and experiences, so the stories became fused with the real world and part of it” (13).

But the didactic urge to “salvage” isn’t always the only motivating factor for adapters. Sometimes, as we have seen, in adapting, Galloway changes the point of view of a familiar story, telling us the tale of “Jack and the Beanstalk” from the perspective of the giant’s devoted wife in order to show us something the “old story” might not have considered. Philip Pullman obviously likes to do this too: in I Was a Rat we get the Cinderella story and its sequel through the eyes of a rat magically transformed into one of the heroine’s attendants—who was not restored at midnight to his true form. In these cases, we clearly need to know and recognize the adapted work in order to “get” the adaptation or at least get the point of it as an adaptation. We can always read these new versions without knowing the adapted work, but we would read them differently. There is a whole other, extra dimension that comes with knowing the adapted work, a dimension that makes the experience of reading a richly “palimpsestuous” one, as we oscillate between the version of the story we already know and the one we are reading now.

But it isn’t always a specific narrative or its particles that get adapted; sometimes it’s a whole imaginative world, a “heterocosm” (literally, another cosmos). Megan Whelan Turner’s deeply engaging Thief of Eddis trilogy
adapts the Greece of both legend and history—mixing time frames ingeniously—just as she adapts the Greeks’ gods and their ancient cities. And Lyra Belacqua’s Oxford is arguably an adaptation of our own. Stories and worlds get adapted, but so, in a sense, do entire works of literature: their stories, worlds, characters, themes—the whole thing. I call these adaptations rather than simply intertexts or allusions because of the fact that they are changed as well as replicated. In biology, that is what adaptation is: replication with variation. Much has been written about Philip Pullman’s rewriting in His Dark Materials of Heinrich von Kleist’s “On the Marionette Theatre,” and even more has been ventured about his adaptation of Genesis, of Milton’s Paradise Lost and of Blake’s interpretation of that text (as well as of his own Songs of Innocence and Experience) (see Reynolds; Walsh). Adapting from innocence to experience is the positive life challenge faced by the adolescent Lyra and Will; and their (young) demons, with their constantly changing shapes, are perfect metaphors for adaptation of all kinds, and not only (most obviously) of Jung’s theory of our opposite sex animus or anima. Children’s literature is, in a way, all about adaptation, about change, just like Ovid’s Metamorphoses.

Not surprisingly, Pullman’s His Dark Materials has been adapted for the stage, in two three-hour plays done by the National Theatre in London, adapted by Nicholas Wright and directed by Nicholas Hytner. BBC Radio 4 did a radio drama version, now available on CD, and RTE (Irish Public Radio) did a version of Northern Lights. The film adaptation of The Golden Compass, directed by Chris Weitz, premiered in December. Whether or not this adaptation’s audiences know that Pullman himself has also adapted the theory of the Oxford quantum physicist David Deutsch about multiple parallel worlds that can be inferred (if not seen) from scientific experiment, they experience the adapters’ visualization of that adapted theory in the film. They just experience it differently, with no palimpsest.

It has been argued that Pullman’s intertextual allusions (what I’m calling his multiple adaptations) are part of his address to a specifically adult (and middle-class) readership (Reynolds 191). But Pullman himself has reminded us that the ancient story-telling traditions always had a mixed audience (Pullman, Let’s Write it in Red 45). And, if I understand the theory of children’s literature correctly, it has always been what Sandra Beckett calls “crossover” literature—aimed at a double audience of both child and adult, the adult experiencing with the child or the adult the child becomes. This is true for their adaptations as well. As one children’s film critic puts it: “To watch again children’s films in adulthood lets us travel self-consciously to somewhere now closed off from us, because the audience has changed, because we have changed” (Newton 18). But in a way,
the double address remains nonetheless. Many of these adapters admit to writing deliberately on two or more levels, hailing their audience thereby not only separately, as child and as adult, but through various conflations: “the child within the adult and the adult within the child” (Collins and Ridgman 13). And then there is the child in the process becoming the adult, whose expanding consciousness is being shaped by his or her experience of reading these stories. As Pullman has taught us, innocence is not a state of stasis to be nostalgically preserved; nor is experience only loss. Readers literally go from innocence to experience over the course of a narrative, and certainly in moving from an adapted text to an adaptation, they become “knowing” readers, no longer presumed innocent.

It has become a truism of adaptation theory lately that adult literary adaptations are held to the criterion of “fidelity” to the adapted text much more than children’s book adaptations are: the loosely based retellings of stories like The Little Mermaid by Walt Disney are usually cited as examples (Reynolds 195). But I don’t think director Christopher Columbus was in jest when he said he was terrified that the young readers of the first Harry Potter novel would be furious with him if he were not faithful to the text they loved so much (qtd. in Whipp H4).

J. K. Rowling is herself, of course, a mighty adapter—of everything from the Dungeons and Dragons games to Wagner’s music drama, Siegfried. Add in other ingredients like “Cinderella,” the Victorian boarding school novel, Enid Blyton, folktales about magic mirrors (see Tucker), and even the orphan Bildungsroman like Great Expectations or Jane Eyre (Burn 233), stir, and you have a recipe for that successful adaptive concoction we know as Harry Potter. And Harry himself has been “remediated,” to use Bolter and Grusin’s term. We not only have the films, but there is the videogame too, where you can “be” Harry (or at least be right behind him) as he faces new dangers and adventures—and new quiddich challenges.

With this latest digital remediation, we move from telling stories (as Rowling does) and from showing them (as the film directors do), to interacting with them. This increases our level or even kind—and certainly intensity—of immersion in the narrative and its world: through our bodily connection, our physical as well as cognitive and imaginative energies are expended. There are aural (music, sound effects), visual, and kinesthetic provocations to response to active game playing. We know that adult books have been adapted for children for centuries—think of Robinson Crusoe’s many abridgements and illustrated versions. But the transfer of that story to CD-ROM by Romain Victor-Pujebet in 2000 offered not only a different mode of engagement for readers but arguably also a different mode of accessing the narrative. First of all, our visual engage-
ment changes, from reading black marks on white pages (or looking at two-dimensional illustrations) to involve a new kind of spatial negotiation through what is called “360° Navigation.” This is a first-person game, where the player has to survive the Island of Despair and find a way to get off. What I find most interesting about this CD-ROM version is how it is in constant dialogue with the novel: Crusoe’s journal is accessible at all times to the gamer to help us figure out what to do and even how to do it. Defoe’s Crusoe was precise and explicit, so his journal acts as a kind of “narrative manual” that we can use, but in a non-linear way (see Sainsbury 220). But however we use it—to solve problems or to follow the narrative (and we do both)—our engagement with the story it tells changes with the addition of the physical immersion into the action of the represented world of the story.

Theme parks do the same thing, of course: children can meet at Disney World all the cartoon characters they see on screen. Not surprisingly, theme park rides are often adapted from films—Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride at Disneyland (until 1998) evidently came from the 1949 film, The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad, an adaptation of A. A. Milne’s 1929 stage play, Toad of Toad Hall, itself an adaptation of Kenneth Grahame’s The Wind in the Willow (see Ridgman 43–44). And I won’t even go into Pirates of the Caribbean—but it went in the other direction, from Disney amusement ride to film(s) and back to simulated interactive virtual-reality theme-park game at Disney World (see Hutcheon 138–39). Can museums and buildings associated with a work of children’s literature offer the same or similar interactive immersion? I’m thinking of Green Gables and other buildings associated with Lucy Maud Montgomery on Prince Edward Island, where children and adults (especially, I’m told, Japanese tourists) can walk through the environment they know from the books (or recognize from the film and television sets) (see Mackey 63–64). Commercialization? Adaptation? Today, they go together. But so too do canonization and adaptation. If a children’s book is adapted to the stage or screen that testifies to its “classic” status. It also, of course, helps to confer that very status in the first place (Collins and Ridgman 11).

So, dear Reader, my gratitude for letting a novice confess what she should have learned well before this: that children’s literature can teach us pretty well anything and everything about literature—and maybe even about children. But I know even less about children, so I shall simply end with a final mea culpa.

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Notes

1 The title is that of Sophie Mayer, who has a better eye/ear for parody—and knows more about children’s literature—than I do. With gratitude.


3 Eco, of course, has also written children’s books, including The Three Astronauts and The Bomb and the General.

4 See Michael Bérbé’s moving testament about how the Harry Potter stories taught his Down syndrome son how to understand narrative—that is, “what it means to be human” (20).

Works Cited


Collins, Fiona M. “Picture Books into Animation: The Art of Movement.” Collins and Ridgman, 147–64.


