READING FOR LEARNING: COGNITIVE APPROACHES TO CHILDREN`S LITERATURE

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Abstract: This article constitutes an introduction to the five articles that appear in this special issue. This framing process starts by highlighting the sparse, yet important, work that has been conducted over the past 20 years on children's literature in the field of stylistics. The focus in the article then turns to a more general discussion of the language of children's literature. Here, in this chronological overview of language usage in books written for children, an outline is sketched from the writers and philosophers of the enlightenment up to contemporary debates on literacy, cognition and theory of mind. In the section that follows, the five studies that appear in this special issue are briefly synopsized.

Keywords: children's literature, language, literacy, style, stylistics, Young Adult Fiction.

INTRODUCTION

This special issue is on the language, style and cognition of children's literature. The issue seeks to bring together scholars from stylistics on the one hand and scholars of children's literature and children's developmental education on the other. One of the many intriguing matters that such a combination of scholars from different disciplines and methodological traditions might lay bare is that we probably have far more that unites us than we realize. It is our hope that this collaboration may lead to exciting new initiatives and cross-fertilizations.

MAIN PART

The works analysed in this special issue range from books for toddlers and young children to works of Young Adult fiction. The first four articles focus on the analysis of children's literature, be it manual/stylistic approaches or computational/corpus approaches. The final article seeks to turn the approach on its head and look not at children's fiction, but at child writers of fiction in an L2 context. This final paper should allow the reader to reflect on the previous four articles with a fresh perspective. It should also bring to light interesting synergies between reception and production that may lead to further research in the field of language and children's literature.

Looking back over the past 60 years, it can be said that stylistic research into children's literature has been rare. It is not that there has been no scholarly research done in the field of stylistics on children's literature. Jeffries (2009), for example, conducted a stylistic case study on the language of poems for children in which she focussed on foregrounding, word-play, voice, structure and the positioning of child readers. She concludes in her study that it is true that there is stylistic tendency in children's verse toward formal or humorous or rhyming aspects (p. 235). She adds though that, because there is no strict divide between children's poetry and adult poetry, this remains a 'tendency' not a fact (p. 235). The gist of this idea was captured by Verdonk (1995), in his earlier study of lexical repetition, when he observed that 'there is no doubt that from our earliest childhood onward we find great pleasure in playing with the formal structures of language, and, the use of lexical repetition appears to be central to this language game' (p. 7).

Stylistic methodology has much to offer the study of children's literature. It brings with it a whole arsenal of theories and frameworks that can be deployed to tease out implicit meanings. Such approaches can also be used in reception studies. These methodologies are also suitable for the whole gambit of children's literature: from texts for toddlers, that have been written to be read aloud, to fiction written for teenagers and young adults.

These beliefs about what children need and want are largely implicit, often based on interpellated ideologies about social class, heritage and ethical worldviews that determine what constitute prosocial values and a good life, and they have certainly changed over time and are variable across cultures. But there is general agreement that children's literature's most pressing analytical challenge is that it is written by people with more experience to address people with less with a goal to impart knowledge and represent the ways the creators feel the world does or perhaps should work. Because these creators are most often deeply embedded in the cultures they represent and yet equally invested in the hope that children can make the future better for themselves and others, children's literature can be both conservative, reinforcing the status quo through the language and story structures that are most recognizable in its socially scripted worlds, and critical, suggesting that children have the motivation, ability and responsibility to fashion worlds that are more open and sustainable. For this reason, the study of children's texts has always been more interested in than objective about questions of the moral and ethical valences of its language and how these questions might be linked to their aesthetic qualities. For instance, 17th century poets and authors such as John Milton, John Bunyan and Isaac Watts crafted scripture into rhymed verse for the express purpose of making learning their Bible more appealing for children.

Of course children's literature did not start with print; folk tales, oral poetry, dramatic performances and sequenced pictorial images primed young ears and eyes with the music and symbols children needed to invest their worlds with meaning, much as they do today. Thus, another challenge that scholars face is that children's literature is multimodal, and thus requires attention to the stylistics of image as well as text and text as image; that is, how and where fonts appear on the page and in interaction with illustrations and how the marks on the page encode and evoke sound and movement in their readers also offer an exceedingly rich stylistic terrain for scholars to explore. However, as with poetry, stylistic and narratological analyses of other kinds of children's texts have rarely been seen as ends in themselves; both historical and contemporary critics of children's literature tend most often to see their objects of study as rhetorical in nature, taking it as writ that each book, poem or performance has a message to be received and critiqued as implicit and suspect ideologies hitch rides on the backs of the most innocent-seeming vehicles. As a result, content analysis is almost always critical content analysis, with style and aesthetics considered subordinate to, in support of, or undermining an explicit ideological perspective (Johnson et al., 2016, 2019). Reading, as Maria Nikolajeva (2014) notes in her cognitive study of children's literature, may indeed be for learning some useful things about how the world and minds work, but verbal and visual language always already carries within it the codes, hierarchies and prejudices that advantage some but disadvantage and devalue others (Stephens, 1992).

CONCLUSION

The award winning children's author and literary scholar and academic Katherine Rundell recently argued in an essay that adults should read children's books (Rundell, 2019). She puts forward several arguments in support of this thesis. These include that children's literature allows us to 'refind' things that we may not even know that we have lost (p. 43); that it shows us in clear terms what concepts like generosity, bravery and hope are like (p.47); and that it helps us to recall what we thought was both possible and impossible (p. 62). She ends her essay with a call to action directed at adults to seek out children's fiction 'to see the world with double eyes: your own, and those of your childhood self' (p. 62). She adds 'refuse unflinchingly to be embarrassed: …' (p. 63). Rundell's arguments make much sense to us.

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