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## Children's Literature *at Fifty*: *Pedagogy Under the Covers*

Elisabeth Rose Gruner

Like so many scholars of children's literature, I came to children's literature through teaching. Trained as a Victorianist, I saw a gap in my department's course offerings and somewhat naively offered to fill it with a children's literature course, banking on my work on childhood in the Victorian novel and my pedagogical skills to carry me through. The Children's Literature Association and *Children's Literature* were my mentors during those years—as they continue to be—teaching me how to teach and think about children's literature both as a genre and as a course of undergraduate study.

Francelia Butler's entrée into the field was somewhat similar. With a doctorate in Renaissance literature, she entered the field not, initially, as a scholar of it, but as one asked to teach large lecture courses to aspiring teachers: her popular course is recalled by others in this forum. Unlike me, however, she had neither a journal nor a professional association to mentor her; instead, she helped found them. The story of her impact on children's literature scholarship, despite that perhaps inauspicious beginning, is outlined throughout this forum, especially in the essays by Margaret Higonnet and Peter Hunt; here, I want to take up Roberta Seelinger Trites's challenge in her forum piece to think more seriously about Butler's, and the journal's, contributions to children's literature pedagogy as well.

Pedagogy is, of course, an area many children's literature scholars avoid, fearing either the association with precisely those large lecture courses or with the "stain" of didacticism so frequently associated with the genre. But from the first volume, *Children's Literature* included an explicit, if heterodox, emphasis on teaching. Butler notes, for example, in her first editor's notes (titled, "The Editor's High Chair") that most humanists' training does not prepare them to teach children's literature, which "lacks the verbal sophistication and complexity with which people in higher education have been traditionally trained to deal" (7). I like this claim, which notes the difficulty of teaching the apparently simple, as well as the recognition that scholarship and teaching have

to go hand in hand: scholars don't (usually) work on what they can't teach.<sup>1</sup> The essay goes on to suggest other reasons for children's literature's low status, but in this essay I want to focus on teaching, and on how *Children's Literature* has contributed not only to raising the status of the field generally—a topic my colleagues are touching on in their contributions to this forum—but specifically, if perhaps indirectly, to the literature and science of teaching. To do so, I'll examine six essays from the journal over the years to show how the journal has engaged with teaching, both with explicit pedagogical suggestions and with scholarship that brings together literary analysis with the philosophy and science of education. It is a rich and sometimes strange combination that is only now, I believe, beginning to bear its most promising fruit.

I begin with Butler's article "Classroom Metaphysics" in volume 1. This brief piece is quite literally a set of teaching tips, prefaced with a call to "relevance" that would not be out of place fifty years later: "In the classroom," she writes, "students are demanding a more complete experience from their subjects—the real meaning of that unfortunate word 'relevance'—that is, they want classes to become part of their lives" (177). What follows are roughly forty tips, and then suggestions for roughly a dozen "colloquium" topics, for creating more relevant and engaged children's literature classrooms. Somewhat disingenuously, Butler writes in her preface,

Unorthodox as they may seem, all have been tried on classes of varying size and make-up and found to be surprisingly successful. After all, the study of this literature, especially, need not be such a deadly earnest thing. A sense of fun adds new dimensions of understanding. Readers can participate in a way that could not be done—or could it?—with the works of say, Henry James or Norman Mailer. (177)

That appositive tells the whole story. Take this work seriously, the article says, even if you are having fun in the classroom.

The approaches to teaching suggested in the piece focus primarily on the interactive, or what we might now call "engagement": have students move to the rhythms of skip-rope rhymes, limericks, or Mother Goose rhymes; do a pantomime, a choral reading, a chant of a suggested text (there are detailed instructions). While most of those would indeed probably not fly in a class on Mailer or James, I've known quite successful poetry classes to use embodied methods for teaching meter. Other methods are more heterodox, perhaps, but also offer real possibilities:

try retelling a well-known story (she suggests "Red Riding Hood") in a verbal exquisite corpse style, one word per person. Or without words. Or with ABCs, rather than words (I'm still trying to work that one out). She connects Edward Lear's limerick heroes (those old men encased in "various containers") with Beckett's *Endgame*, and a few lines later she suggests colloquia on topics including the logic of fantasy, sex and violence in children's literature, comics, Native American folktales, African folktales, illustration and children's books—the list goes on and on. Its miscellaneous quality feels a bit like rummaging in an attic, and the juxtapositions are at times jarring—surely some of these topics require their own courses, their own specializations, while others might simply be a way to pass one class period?

Yet what is particularly striking about the list is how many of the techniques feel familiar to me, in form if not in content. Indeed, some of them might have come right out of recent volumes on teaching I've consulted, including Diana Fuss and William Gleason's *Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*, or John Bean's well-worn *Engaging Ideas*. Although I may have encountered the techniques elsewhere, Butler actually theorized some of them in volume 2 of *Children's Literature*, in the coauthored article, "Educational Survival Kit: Learning, Basic Human Interests, and the Teaching of Children's Literature," along with J. Bruce W. McWilliams and Robert G. Miner, Jr. This article puts some of the techniques of the toolkit in volume 1 (and others) into a framework structured around basic human functions: respiration (for the study of skip-rope rhymes, the pastoral, and "island" literature, for example); ingestion (quests as the ingestion of experience); digestion (fables and fantasies that "digest" experiences into lessons); excretion (shadows, double, projections); and reproduction (cyclical stories of birth and rebirth, poetry with circular rhymes, etc.). The article ends by suggesting that "the neglect until recently of children's literature by scholars in the Humanities may turn out to be a blessing in disguise. With as yet no *status quo* in the field, methods of teaching the subject can be flexible—as various, unorthodox, and unpredictable as children's books themselves" (251). While the theoretical framework that Butler et al. propose in this article does not seem to have been taken up by later educational theorists, their grounding principle—that students have needs, and that educators should recognize them—is indeed central to the work I've recently been reading in inclusive pedagogy.<sup>2</sup>

The miscellaneity of these articles, like the collection of potential research topics in the first volume (cited by Peter Hunt in this forum),

is in fact a harbinger of the richness of what *Children's Literature* has had to offer the teacher—though, again, things may not have gone exactly as Butler might have planned. While the “areas for research” in that first volume included over two dozen topics focused one way or another on didacticism (usually its failings), there were only five or so on what might generously be interpreted as pedagogical topics (including *Sesame Street* and, perhaps my favorite, “the student as Hobbit”). It strikes me, then, that despite the keen interest in and awareness of the importance of pedagogy displayed in that first volume, Butler and/or the editorial board still feared what they seem to have interpreted as the taint of didacticism, the whiff of educational theory, in a humanities journal.

When pedagogy does enter the picture, it does so mostly under the cover of literary analysis—perhaps both avoiding treading on the toes of the work already being done in *Children's Literature in Education* and the *Journal of Children's Literature* and reaffirming the commitment to humanistic scholarship conveyed in that first volume.<sup>3</sup> Yet that intersection of pedagogy and literary analysis, even if it has been unrepresentative, has been fruitful. As Butler made clear in the first volume, after all, the humanities justify themselves as investigations into questions of value, and both what and how we teach are implicitly statements of value as well.

In examining almost five decades of *Children's Literature*, I found nothing in the latter volumes that looks anything like Butler's two pedagogical articles in the first two issues—no lists of teaching tips, no suggestions for theoretical approaches to teaching, no calls for pedagogical innovation. That said, there are two distinct threads of pedagogical engagement in the years following those two initial forays into children's literature pedagogy.

The first is what we might call the close reading, “text as teacher” approach. That title, of course, is taken from Perry Nodelman's volume 13 essay on *Charlotte's Web*, which is perhaps the model for other similar works. These essays burrow in on a text or group of texts, but they may also draw on some older assumptions about children and adults, drawing distinctions, relying on difference. Nodelman's essay—discussed further below—is an excellent example of this kind of work. It is very useful in teaching, and certainly helps students see how something that happens in one text may also be at work in others, but it is mostly concerned with what defines children's literature, what makes it different from other genres. It uses the text, in other words, to teach us about the genre itself.<sup>4</sup>

The other type of essay is more thickly descriptive, often more interdisciplinary, drawing on work done in other fields on the history and philosophy of childhood, of pedagogy, of literature. Mitzi Myers's "Erotics of Pedagogy," in volume 23, offers a premier example of this kind of work, which we also see more recently in Marah Gubar's "Toothless Pedagogy," from volume 48. Both texts expand the category of children's literature studies to childhood studies and, indeed, to pedagogical theory, challenging assumptions about childhood and about what the teacherly text is or does. We might call this second type of essay, following Myers's own term, "metapedagogical"; it uses pedagogical theory to shine a light on how the texts under consideration themselves imply a kind of pedagogy.

Both kinds of essays follow several of the threads Butler's compendium of research topics imagined—standards of criticism, genre study, the humanist's perspective, etc.—but they do so in vastly different ways. While "text as teacher" essays may be more traditionally literary critical, the metapedagogical essays are more interdisciplinary, carving out space—as did the journal itself, in its earliest years—within the broad traditions of both humanistic (including historical and philosophical as well as literary) and educational scholarship. Together, they represent the range of opportunities that *Children's Literature* has offered to the student of literature and pedagogy and the ways that future students may continue their work.

I encountered Perry Nodelman's "Text as Teacher: The Beginning of *Charlotte's Web*" so long ago that it has come to feel, when I read it now, like my own ideas. Surely I noticed the doubled structure of White's classic novel years ago? No doubt I did, coached by Nodelman's essay, or one of the many other analyses of the novel that follow its lead. Nodelman begins with what might seem a problem for children's literature: "the ability to understand fiction depends upon a reader's prior knowledge of the codes and conventions" of fiction (109). How is the naïve reader, the child reader, to attain those codes except by reading fiction, fiction which they will not understand? Rejecting the notion that we're born knowing how to interpret stories, Nodelman suggests rather that texts like *Charlotte's Web*—and most other children's stories, he implies—teach their readers how to read them. In working through the analysis of the "problem" of the opening of *Charlotte's Web*, then—the two chapters that focus primarily on Fern, give us no access to Wilbur's consciousness, and, perhaps most strikingly, make little use of White's characteristic listing technique—Nodelman's essay demonstrates how the two chapters nonetheless enact the basic pattern of the novel:

A pig is saved from death by a female of a different species with whom he actually has nothing in common. She saves him because his death is unjust. She saves him by using words. . . . As well as saving the pig, the female also mothers him. . . . [The pig] is threatened by an aggressive, warlike male, a real rat. But not seriously; for the real threat is time itself, which eventually changes both the female and the pig enough to separate them from each other. (119–20)

As Nodelman notes, this pattern appears twice, first in the “Fern” section of the novel and again in the longer “Charlotte” section. The essay goes on, of course, to demonstrate the important differences between the first and second parts of the novel as well, focusing especially on the way the first, “realistic,” part actually relies heavily on stereotypes and wish fulfillment, while the longer, “fantasy” section “will not reproduce the reader’s own disposition” (122). That is, the essay argues, White introduces greater moral complexity into the novel only after he has “taught” the reader enough to develop a more sophisticated reading strategy, providing a “cognitive map” (125).

Nodelman’s sophisticated argument itself offers readers a cognitive map, first walking through the familiar territory of folk and fairy tale analysis as well as the comfort of a well-loved novel. But the essay goes, of course, beyond an analysis of *Charlotte’s Web* itself to suggest a model for understanding (some) children’s literature. Again relying on well-worn terms (here, innocence and experience), the essay ends by making a larger claim for a way of understanding children’s literature itself as helping move its readers from innocence to experience through the act of reading (see 125–27). Texts teach, Nodelman’s essay thus argues, by scaffolding the experience of reading them for the reader.

An earlier example of the “text as teacher” type of article appears, though far more briefly, in volume 3. In “Chaucer’s *Treatise on the Astrolabe*: A Handbook for the Medieval Child,” Thomas J. Jambeck and Karen J. Jambeck focus on the ways that Chaucer’s work teaches the medieval child (in this case, the author’s son) how to read a complicated text. This essay answers Butler’s call for an analysis of children’s literature by writers for adults (while also taking up her question, is there medieval children’s literature?). While their focus on pedagogy is slight, the article does note that in his translation of Messahala’s *Treatise*, Chaucer “adapt[s] . . . his source to the needs of a ten year old.” Jambeck and Jambeck go on to argue that “implicit in his adaptation are certain fundamental attitudes about children, their formative



experience, and the literature which underpins that experience" (118): in other words, there is a pedagogy implied in Chaucer's text that is lacking in the original.

This suggestion—that texts may imply a pedagogy—is, however, explored more fully and taken in a new direction in Mitzi Myers's work in the journal, such as in her groundbreaking article, "The Erotics of Pedagogy: Historical Intervention, Literary Representation, the 'Gift of Education,' and the Agency of Children." Here, we see the journal at its best: explicating a text, developing a practice, modeling a theory. Equally attentive to the history of childhood, the status of children's literature criticism, and the competing and intersecting social locations of gender, age, class, and history, the essay embodies the practice it describes, teaching its readers how to read Maria Edgeworth's 1809 tale, *Madame de Fleury*, as the tale teaches its own readers how to feel and act—and not only how to read the story but how to read historical children's literature "under the sign" of the child. Myers's work expands on the "text as teacher" model to develop its own theory of pedagogy—interrogating assumptions about pedagogy, childhood, and children's literature as it demonstrates the teacherliness of the text under consideration.

Like much of Butler's early work in the journal, Myers's article is polemical, arguing for the importance of taking Edgeworth's work seriously—and, by extension, taking women's and children's work seriously. Myers grants the child reader agency in the pedagogical exchange that takes place in this work, arguing that "pedagogic texts are anything but inert; they register the two-way traffic between producer and consumer, adult and child, public and private, rational and affective" (19). Myers also rejects the didactic-aesthetic divide in this piece, arguing instead for both art and agency in Edgeworth's work, imagining its pedagogical aim, she claims, as "other than the imperialistic thought police of both conventional and more recent . . . children's literary history" (5). In the essay, Myers ranges widely, from the real-life child Marjory Fleming, to Edgeworth's encounters with the founder of a French infant school, to Edgeworth's own pedagogical experiences with her father, finding that "Edgeworth's tale is what we might call metatextual or metapedagogic; that is, it is about how to transmit cultural knowledge, as well as a dramatic picture of what happens when child agency is empowered" (13).<sup>5</sup>

Myers's work is itself metapedagogic, of course, as it demonstrates how to transmit lost cultural knowledge, teaching its readers both how to read Edgeworth and how Edgeworth teaches her own readers. The

essay also, I believe, anticipates Marah Gubar's work in another of the journal's key works on pedagogy and paternalism, "Toothless Pedagogy? Problematizing Paternalism in Children's Literature and Childhood Studies." Twenty-five years after Myers tackles the problem of paternalistic pedagogy in Edgeworth's work, Gubar takes up similar questions as she suggests that our contemporary anxiety about paternalism is both misplaced and disingenuous. Her article is also a rare occasion in the journal for personal reflections on teaching, beginning as it does with an anecdote from the classroom. Moving easily between philosophy, close reading, and pedagogical theory, Gubar's essay pairs well with Myers's as examples of how literary criticism can take up pedagogy. Both essays reject the negative valence that didacticism so often carries in readings of literature, but they reclaim pedagogy as a positive term, one to embrace in our understanding of what children's literature can, at its best—and our best—do and be. In so doing, they also, perhaps, build on Butler's vision of the children's literature classroom: wide-ranging, embodied, and engaged.

Gubar's essay is also, like Myers's, deeply interdisciplinary. By reaching outside the boundaries of literary criticism and theory per se, the essay is able to develop its claims about paternalism and bring them back to critical pedagogy (revising Paulo Freire, a touchstone for Myers as well) and, ultimately, to children's literature again: what is at stake when we celebrate a text for being antipaternalistic? Gubar's essay makes explicit what is often implicit in other work on children's literature. When we ask about meaning-making in a text, whether that is as a teacher or as an interpreter, we are engaging in a pedagogy. And when a text makes meaning, it too is engaging in a pedagogy. Both texts and teachers "hint, nudge, float possibilities, and artfully frame and contextualize . . . to make some [ideas] more salient and accessible than others" (190).

I might end here, but in the same volume of *Children's Literature* in which Gubar's essay appeared, we find one further engagement with pedagogy, perhaps one additional turn of the screw. Ashley Hope Pérez's "Learning Unbounded: Education in Daniel José Older's Shadowshaper Fantasy Series" offers a model of emancipatory education that she calls "a *learning with* rather than a *teaching to*" (138). Drawing, like Myers and Gubar, on Paulo Freire's work, Pérez walks readers through an analysis of Older's work that demonstrates how youth can participate in their own education, and "suggest[s] that readers can transform their worlds by shaping their narratives" (144)—as, for example, when Sierra

reframes her history teacher's account of slavery in the early republic, speaking back to the dominant narrative from her own experience and knowledge. The vision of hope embodied in Pérez's analysis of Older's work comports well with the partnership model of pedagogy analyzed by both Myers and Gubar.

My own pedagogical practices have been deeply informed by *Children's Literature* over the years; the many scholars who have contributed their time and talents to its pages have enriched both my scholarship and my classroom. And it was *Children's Literature* that gave me, too, a space to think and write about pedagogy and children's literature as I was beginning to work out ideas about the relationship between reading, teaching, and literary study that continue to animate me. Most obviously, of course, I drew on Perry Nodelman's essay cited here to authorize my own metapedagogical excursions in "Teach the Children: Education and Knowledge in Recent Children's Fantasy," the volume 37 essay that later became the germ of my book on reading in YA literature. Like my colleagues and interlocutors cited here, I found in *Children's Literature* a welcoming space for exploring the interrelationships between children's fiction, pedagogy, and agency. As I wrote in that piece, some children's books not only thematize education for their readers, they enact it, providing the sort of autonomous education already theorized by pedagogical thinkers like John Dewey, John Holt, and (the uncited but ever-present) Paulo Freire and bell hooks.

At its best, then, what the journal has been able to do is to allow scholars to develop their pedagogical, philosophical, historical, and literary critical ideas in a humanistic package that Francelia Butler might not have recognized, but that nonetheless develops clearly out of her earliest work. We can no longer say, as Butler did in her article on classroom metaphysics, that humanities scholars are neglecting children's literature. These contributions to pedagogy—from Butler's tips, tricks, and theories, to the close readings that teach us, to the wide-ranging pedagogical deep dives that are Mitzi Myers's legacy—deserve to be recognized as part of that attention.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I recognize that many scholars, of course, do not teach in their research areas. The exigencies of curriculum development and the demands of departmental schedules, however, are not the same as the impulse to study and share—in the classroom, the journal, or, now, the podcast or blog post.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Verschelden and Pasquerella's deployment of Maslow's hierarchy in *Bandwidth Recovery*. See especially chapter 8.

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Higonnet, in her forum piece in this volume, makes clear that the fields of library science, education, and literary criticism were always intertwined in the journal, even as Butler insisted on the primacy of its humanistic commitment.

<sup>4</sup>Roberta Seelinger Trites, in her forum piece, notes that the journal and its contributors seem to have moved away from theorizing children's literature as a genre of late, and I would submit that these "text as teacher" articles were a significant contribution to that work.

<sup>5</sup>Ruwe's "Guarding the British Bible from Rousseau," in volume 29, offers another example of Myers's technique. The essay, like Myers's, takes a woman writer and her pedagogical impulses seriously, as telling us something about how children are also being taken seriously by the writer. As Ruwe notes, Trimmer is no radical like Godwin, but in her critique of Godwin's Bible stories, she draws on her expertise as a Bible critic and pedagogue to argue both for the importance of pedagogy itself (not rote learning but developmental pedagogy) and for the value of imagination (but also its danger) in developing religious and moral thought. Ruwe, like Myers, complicates the seemingly simple (and therefore ignorable) "didactic" text, teaching us how to read through didacticism for a more complex analysis.

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