Theory Into Practice

Literary theory and children's literature: Interpreting ourselves and our worlds

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W HAT IN LITERATURE ENGAGES the imaginations of young readers? How do characters come to life and speak to them? How do young readers see themselves and the world in books, or not, and what do they resist or talk back to in those pages? How do they express these responses in communities of readers? What is the relationship of their reading practices to those of their peers, their families, the larger world they inhabit? These questions about children and books have been more frequently asked in the past 30 years and have been examined through a variety of lenses, most notably from the many perspectives that can be loosely grouped under the rubric of literary "response studies."

The progression of research on children's responses to literature can be traced from notions about the construction of the reader to descriptions of the intersection of reader and text worlds and, more recently, to a focus on the wider social and cultural context of reading children's literature. In order to grasp the complexity of influences on how we have attempted to understand what young readers are doing, it is important to consider the rich and varied traditions from which these understandings are drawn. In this article, following a brief history (see also Beach, 1991, 1993; Martinez & Roser, 1991), I discuss the complex issues related

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to the canon, reading, culture, and schooling that remain to be explored, studied, and debated. In particular, I argue that we may need to re-examine why we want or expect children and young adults to read in particular ways, and to what ends.

Constructing Readers

Until recently, much of the theory, research, and practice related to children's and young adult responses to literature was influenced by educational studies of response to literature (e.g., Harding, 1937; Purves & Rippere, 1968; Richards, 1925; Squire, 1964); work in literary theory, particularly from a reader-response perspective (Rosenblatt, 1978; Tompkins, 1980); and work in cognitive psychology (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Bruner, 1990). I briefly address the ways these very different traditions converged to influence our constructions of "the reader" in order to situate more recent theories and practices related to the reception of children's literature.

> In the first grade they teach you, they ask you, "how did you like this story?". . . and so from second grade on they say, "I want you to give hard evidence and support your ideas," and before you know it, you're writing five paragraph essays. (ninth-grade student reflecting on his school experiences with literature, Rogers, 1991)

Response to literature studies carried out in the 1960s and '70s by researchers such as Alan Purves, James Wilson, James Squire, and Arthur

Applebee (for a review, see Purves & Beach, 1972) focused on written response preferences or stances and how these develop in real student readers. They found that student response preferences ranged from more personal to more descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative (Purves & Rippere, 1968) and from more literal to more analytic over time (Applebee, 1973). While this work was groundbreaking at the time because of its emphasis on real readers, it was not until the influence of reader-response criticism that the relationships of readers and texts were more fully theorized by researchers.

Reader-response criticism, to the degree that it is a single theoretical perspective focusing on readers, has its origins in structuralism (Tompkins, 1980), but among its most powerful renderings are those that emerged from a post-structuralist concern with the play of meaning in texts. Prior to post-structuralism, most reader-response theorists (unlike response to literature researchers) were less concerned with actual readers and more concerned with the ways in which texts (and authors) constructed readers. However, post-structuralist theorists (e.g., Bleich, 1978; Fish, 1980; Iser, 1978), particularly Stanley Fish, turned away from texts themselves to search for the creation of meaning, toward the reader and her processes and strategies as the primary source of those meanings. Drawing on his now well-known anecdote in which a students asks, "Is there a text in this class?" (by which the student meant, will there be some belief in the notion that texts exist separately from readers?), Fish (1980) argues that the play or instability of texts and meaning is not worrisome given the constraints on interpretive strategies provided by the communities of readers in which we reside. Although he abandons any notion of stable meaning in texts, he argues that there will be a fair amount of shared meanings by virtue of our shared beliefs about how we create meaning from text (Fish, 1980).

> It is apparent that although theorists of reader-oriented criticism disagree on many issues, they are united in one thing: their opposition to the belief that meaning inheres completely and exclusively in the literary text. (Tompkins, 1980, p. 201)

While Fish's concept of an interpretive community was quickly and powerfully critiqued (see below), his persuasive thesis—that readers create the meanings of, and perhaps even write, the texts

they read—resonated with contemporary work in the psychology of reading and with early work done on readers' responses to literature. It was also a clear rejection of strongly held beliefs of New Critics, such as the notion of an "affective fallacy"—i.e., it is less productive to pay attention to a reader's "impressions" of a work of literature than to the work itself (Beardsley & Wimsatt, 1954). Prior to this point, New Critical and related text-based or "academic" perspectives had strongly influenced the way literature was taught in high schools (Willinsky, 1991), while what literature was read in the elementary schools was often in service to simple enjoyment or learning how to read.

In the '70s and early '80s, the work of cognitive psychologists interested in the reading process also focused on the ways actual readers construct meaning from texts, with an emphasis on the relationship between new information and what readers already know (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Psycholinguists, who study the psychological aspects of language use, had already begun to illustrate the way readers process the language systems of texts (Bruner, 1990; Goodman, 1986, Smith, 1971). Together, these areas of inquiry influenced a whole new generation of research on children's responses to literature—or "response studies"—that drew attention to the ways in which young readers read and respond to literary texts. These studies both influenced and reflected a pedagogical shift toward child-centered classrooms, toward reclaiming literature as a subject even at the elementary level, and toward a renewed emphasis on teaching reading through "real" or authentic literature, as opposed to reading stories in structured basal reading programs (Hickman, 1994; Huck, 1977).

Performing Literature

> The story-maker . . . makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true." . . . You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. (Tolkein, 1947/1965, p. 37)

While reader-response critics, educators, and psychologists were discovering, or rediscovering,[1] the powerful role of the reader in constructing meaning from texts, literary theorists who had long understood this phenomenon were themselves rediscovered, most notably Louise Rosenblatt (1938, 1978). Rosenblatt (1978) focuses not only on the reader's

meaning making but also on the rich interaction or transactions between readers and literary texts, transactions that create connections and dialogues between a reader's whole "world" (affective, experiential, cognitive) and the "secondary worlds" (Benton, 1992a) of literature. Rosenblatt (1978) speaks of these transactions as "lived through" experiences, invoking a sense of a reading as the creation of a dynamic, alternative reality—one that requires the active participation, or even performance, of the reader in creating "the poem" that results.

Two particularly interesting and interrelated areas of inquiry into young children's responses to literature that emerged at this time include case studies of young readers' stances toward and engagement with literature by authors such as Cynthia Rylant, Patricia Maclachlan, Betsy Byars, and Katherine Paterson. This research, leaning on earlier studies done by Harding (1937) and Applebee (1973), as well as on the theoretical work of Rosenblatt (1938, 1978), Bleich (1978), Fish (1980), Iser (1978), and others, explores the unique, complex, and dynamic ways in which individual readers enter and engage in the text world(s) (Benton, 1983, 1992b; Enciso, 1992; Galda, 1982; Langer, 1989) and individual patterns in the ways they make meaning from or reconstruct those worlds (Cox & Many, 1992; Galda, 1992).

A parallel area of study during the '80s and '90s includes examinations of these rich transactions in the contexts of classrooms. Earlier researchers, drawing on large scale studies, had argued that variations in instructional contexts influence the ways in which students respond to literature (e.g., Purves, 1981). A new generation of qualitative response studies, some of which were influenced by sociolinguistic and ethnographic methodologies and perspectives (Bloome & Green, 1984; Heath, 1983; Mishler, 1979; Saville-Troike, 1982), take a closer look at this relationship at various levels of schooling (Hickman, 1983; Hynds, 1989; Rogers, 1991). These studies explore the relationship of particular instructional contexts and discourses to the ways students learn to respond to literature.

[Two first grade boys] look at each other, giggle behind their hands, and jiggle in a way that indicates anticipation as Mrs. H reads the first few lines (of "The Acrobats" by Shel Silverstein) describing the

contortions of a group of trapeze artists. When she reaches the abrupt last line—"don't sneeze"—[the two boys] produce huge mock sneezes and tumble down the steps onto the floor of the [classroom] library, shoulders heaving with laughter. (Hickman, 1983, pp. 8-9)

Hickman's (1981) year-long study, in particular, describes the unfolding of children's naturally occurring responses to literature in three classrooms spanning kindergarten to grade 5. The study expands our notions of the range of response types children exhibit beyond talking and writing (e.g., listening, movement, drama, and artistic responses). Related studies of storybook reading also emphasize the role of the context, including the role of adult readers, in children's internalization of patterns or ways of reading (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Heath, 1983; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Similarly, studies of peer interactions surrounding literature, such as work done by Eeds and Wells (1989), illustrate the ways in which fifth grade children support each other's responses to stories, sometimes even engaging in "grand conversations" about literature.

More recently, during the 1990s, work in drama and response to literature has extended the work in response to literature by illustrating ways in which classrooms can open up "spaces for learning that can include students' multiple social, cultural and expressive knowledge" (Wolf, Edmiston, & Enciso, 1997) and encourage students to imaginatively enter text worlds and create worlds that exist on the "edges" of those texts. This work on drama and response to literature echoes Rosenblatt's (1978) vision of reading as a alternative reality that is constructed, lived through, and, at its best, does not leave readers' imaginations and perspectives untouched. The intersection of work on response and drama also underscores the reader-response notion that readers "perform" the literary works they read, and extends this performance out from the reader's mind and into the newly created "as if" worlds that draw on talk, gesture, and interaction.

This work, taken together, not only enriches our view of the transactions of readers and texts but begins to situate these transactions in their immediate and varied social contexts. Studies of literacy practices in general have continued to broaden our

notions of social contexts and the relationship of classroom contexts to larger social, cultural, and political contexts. At the same time, the field of children's literature, and response in particular, has relocated books in the social contexts of their creation and reception, and situated reading practices in the social and cultural practices of their classroom communities (Lewis, 1997; McCarthey, 1998). In this work, literacy and literary practices, as social and cultural practices, cannot be separated from cultural and social issues in and beyond the classroom—particularly issues of power, race, class, and gender—that influence how both children and adults read and interact with books in school and non-school settings.

Literacy as Cultural Practice

Readers and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language shareable imaginative worlds. (Morrison, 1992, p. xii)

The ideas that literature and ways of reading both represent and produce social, cultural, and institutional practices and meanings (Poovey, 1992), and that the teaching of reading and literature is a normative, political practice (Luke, 1993; Luke & Baker, 1991), have taken on increasing importance in light of recent theoretical influences on literacy education, including critical pedagogy (e.g., Gilbert, 1990; McLaren, 1989), multiculturalism (Banks, 1993; Sleeter, 1994), cultural anthropology (Gee, 1996; Street, 1995), and cultural studies. Cultural studies, in particular, has become almost synonymous with literary studies in universities. The origins of cultural studies can be traced back to the work of researchers such as Hoggart (1957), who studied literacy practices as part of a larger network of life practices and held that life practices could not be separated into "high" and "low" cultural practices (Williams, 1958).

In relationship to literature, cultural studies argues that authors construct and reflect political and cultural meanings through symbolic forms (including texts) that should be studied in terms of the issues of social representation and politics of meaning that they yield. From this perspective, distinctions between literary and other cultural discourses are erased. Literary texts are simply one kind of text in a vast network of cultural texts and are not necessarily accorded higher status than, say,

a newspaper.[2] This perspective also reveals literary canons as social and cultural constructs, reflecting the tastes and influence of dominant groups.

> To attempt to appropriate our own discourses by using Western critical theory uncritically is to substitute one mode of neocolonialism for another. To begin to do this in our own tradition, many theorists have turned to the black vernacular tradition . . . to isolate the signifying black difference through which to theorize about the so-called discourse of the Other. (Gates, 1994, pp. 174-175)

Particular areas of cultural studies, such as Marxist studies, Black studies, and feminist studies, have raised our awareness of reading as constituted of raced, classed, and gendered processes that cannot be fully understood in the absence of analyses of power and privilege. In his critique of Fish's notion of an interpretive community, for instance, Marxist critic Terry Eagleton (1983) points out that interpretive communities may actually be sites in which there is a struggle of interpretation when "certain meanings are elevated by social ideologies to a privileged position" (p. 132). Students in such communities may draw on previously learned conventions of reading and writing, as well as on cultural situatedness, such as race, class, and gender (Rabinowitz, 1987), so that readers take various identity or subject positions that may complement or contradict one another (Rogers & Soter, 1997).

Work from Black and feminist criticism also points to the role of positionality and identity in literacy and literary practice, arguing that constructs of race and gender are fundamental categories of literary analysis. They maintain, for instance, that inscriptions of race and gender can be read in cultural texts (e.g., Gates, 1990). Black criticism, with its roots in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/1989) and Ralph Ellison (1952/1982), among others, seeks to look toward the African-American language and tradition to derive principles of literary criticism, to understand a Black subjective position in relation to a dominant cultural position (or whiteness), and to expand the American literary canon (e.g., Gates, 1994).

Feminist criticism also seeks to expand the canon, as well as to critique representations of women in literature and to understand gendered reading (Flynn & Schweickart, 1986). Feminists

working in the area of reading and literature argue that women and girls learn gender-specific ways of reading and construct and reconstruct specific kinds of interpretive communities, literacy practices, and identities, often through reading texts of popular culture that contain conflicting or "double-edged" messages about female agency (Christian-Smith, 1993; Radway, 1984). Even when they purport to be progressive, feminist stories (and other cultural texts, such as films) for young audiences ultimately provide traditional images, metaphors, and narrative structures (such as those of romance stories) that either reify gender differences or, if resisted, create contradictory positionings for children (Davies, 1989; Nodelman, 1997).

The relationship of literary practices to institutional practices, and to issues of representation of race, class, and gender, have been taken up in recent work on young readers' responses to literature. In a pioneering case study, Sims (1983) describes a young African American girl's preference for stories with strong Black girls as protagonists, suggesting the need for more such literature as well as more studies of young African American readers. Studies by Spears-Bunton (1990), Fairbanks (1995), Athanases (1998), and others (see Rogers & Soter, 1997) have continued to examine ways in which students and teachers can address the interplay of engagement, identity, resistance, and cultural difference in classroom interpretive communities at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

> But that's another thing of the man's personality, that we might not know what he's really like although he rescued her, she was really good looking but imagine if it was someone who was really ugly 'cause it said, at first he fell in love with her so that might be the only reason he rescued her. (Sixth grade student analyzing constructs of gender and beauty in *Snow White*, Davies, 1993, p. 162)

Without necessarily explicitly naming this move, many literacy researchers are beginning to recognize the ways in which children and young adults, rather than simply identifying with characters in simplistic ways or consistently responding across texts and contexts in predictable ways, tend to construct multiple subjectivities and identities. Post-structuralist theorists argue against focusing on specific and marked differences and, instead,

for recognizing that individuals, through language and discourse, create multiple subject positions (Belsey, 1980) as they interact in social situations. It is through this multiplicity of positions that young readers can ultimately construct themselves in ways that allow for an array of possibilities.

Rather than leaning on the notion of normative and consensus-building interpretive communities in classrooms, these post-structuralist perspectives argue for a space in which identities and positions can be negotiated—spaces in which a new "playing field" is created (Dyson, 1996) for deciding what is good, just, fair, and possible, and, for older students, spaces in which literacy practices themselves can be interrogated and critiqued (Luke & Baker, 1991). As Greene (1994) reminds us,

> Works of art, of all human creations, are occasions for explorations, not for completion. Indeed, they remind us that history and the human story can never be completed. In this way, literature, as with other forms of art, can become a harbinger of the possible. (p. 218)

Some Knotty Issues

> Young boy: I'm gonna write a book that the bad guys win.
> Adult: Would you want to live in a world where bad guys win?
> Young boy: No, but I want to read about it.
> Second boy: You would want to live in a world where bad guys win if you were the bad guys. (personal communication with two boys, grades 3 and 5)

My conversation with these two boys reminded me that we are left, at the end of this century, with several knotty issues related to the exploration of the relationship of literary theory, children, books, and teaching. These issues have to do with: what (and who) constitutes a literary canon for children; why we teach literature, and especially an expanded canon of literature, to children; and how we are to choreograph and interpret this complicated dance of reading, identity, representation, and resistance in our classroom spaces and communities.

A literary canon

Recently the Modern Library compiled a list of the 100 best novels written in English, and, perhaps not surprisingly, the list was dominated by books written by White males. But, as panel member William Styron (1998) points out, an alternative list

published by a group of college students serves as a "bracing corrective" to the Modern Library list. What he found "most refreshing" was the presence of children's books on the alternative list, including *Charlotte's Web* and *Winnie the Pooh*. He may also have found it refreshing to know that the author responsible for the first and third best novels on the Modern Library list, James Joyce, has a children's book to his credit, *The Cat and the Devil* (1981).

However, while children's books rarely make official adult canon lists, there is an ongoing argument about what constitutes a canon of multicultural literature for children. Vigorous discussions about how inclusive the term multicultural is and should be (Bishop, 1994; Schwartz, 1995; Shannon, 1994) show us there are still disagreements about our definitions, if not our goals, for literature teaching.[3] Yet much of this debate takes place outside the presence of children.

It has long been acknowledged that the adult literary canon is socially constructed in ways that represent the interests and values of dominant cultural groups. When we turn our view to the canon created for children, the issues become even more complex. Adults are largely responsible for constructing the children's canon, representing children in it, and orchestrating the ways in which children interact with that canon. Historically, books written for children were often morally didactic, and they still carry many traces of didacticism even if the messages of the works have shifted.

As Nodelman (1997) points out, adults tend to represent their own ideas about childhood, including the notion that it is a time of innocence. He argues that in this way literature potentially becomes oppressive by providing only partial representations of what is possible for children to be. For these reasons, the canon of children's literature has, and will likely continue to have, an uneasy position in the world of literature and in the fields of literary and cultural studies.

Why teach children's literature?

These issues of the canon and representation are also inextricably tied to our purposes for teaching literature to students, which are in turn tied to our notions of the role of schooling. We have left behind models of literature teaching that result in simply interpreting the texts themselves to interpreting and re-interpreting ourselves and our worlds through reading. To turn to literature teaching as a means toward understanding difference, perhaps even to change attitudes toward others and to work toward social justice, is to reach toward transformative models of reading and schooling. The role of literature in this new enterprise is closely aligned with issues of power and dominance, and is embedded in historically situated arguments about difference and social justice.

For instance, the teaching of literature by award-winning authors has raised complex issues of cultural authenticity and how specific cross-cultural works represent issues of race. Some works, because of their dehistoricized and culturally dominant representations of race relations, may close down dialogue, such as Spinelli's *Maniac McGee* (1990, cited in Enciso, 1997). Other works may have the potential to open up dialogue. Mildred Taylor's (1990) *Mississippi Bridge*, written by an African American author through the voice of a young White boy, for instance, may engender conversations about race by situating readers historically and culturally in ways that authentically portray issues of difference and power.

Post-structuralist or postmodernist perspectives may call these issues into question by arguing that certain categories of difference, such as ethnicity, are social constructions, and our notions of "others" are often overly simplified. Yet if we are to situate ourselves historically as well as socially and culturally, we cannot turn away from privileging the meaning of some differences over others or ignore the weight of past injustices and current power differentials. We may need to more fully articulate our goals for literature teaching, schooling, and societal change in order to clarify our current understandings of what is possible for children, books, and reading as we work toward social change.

A final challenge in negotiating children's responses to literature will be to capture the complexity of their lived experiences, their private and social performances, and their play with and resistance to the demands of particular ways of reading and particular kinds of stories. What kinds of classroom communities will we create in order to provide

dialogic spaces in the institution of schooling, in which, drawing on literature as an art, we help children to know in new ways, read the world in new ways, and negotiate their responses in a postmodern world?

Notes

1. This emphasis on the reader has antecedents both in philosophical origins of rhetorical theory, such as the work of Aristotle, and in psychology, such as the work of Edmund Huey and Mortimer Adler.

2. These new constructions of literary theory and literature teaching have not been without criticism and even backlash in the form of "cultural wars" that erupted in the late '80s and early '90s. Literary formalists and other cultural critics such as Allan Bloom, E.D. Hirsch, and George Will have criticized the emergence of cultural studies on university campuses and have forcefully argued for a return to the canon, non-political readings of the classics, and required reading lists at all levels of education.

3. Unfortunately, much of this debate centers on semantics and misrepresentations of each other's ideas. Bishop, for instance, never argues that her work with African American literature for children is synonymous with multicultural literature (a term that is itself often misused for literature that is multi-ethnic), yet her work is critiqued by Schwartz (1995) as "modernist" while Shannon (1994) is seen as postmodernist. Such labels obscure the point that both Shannon (1994) and Bishop (1994) are largely in agreement about the goals or ends of teaching multi-ethnic or any literature.

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