

# Fractures and Disruptions in Children's Literature



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Edited by

Ana Margarida Ramos, Sandie Mourão  
and Maria Teresa Cortez

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## INTRODUCTION

ANA MARGARIDA RAMOS,  
SANDIE MOURÃO  
AND MARIA TERESA CORTEZ

### **Fractures and Disruptions in Children's Literature**

The evolution of children's literature has been characterized both by moments of tradition and rupture oscillating between a certain conservative tendency and an innovative experimentalism, as indeed is the case with canonical or institutionalized literature. The idea that fracture and disruption are a mark of contemporary times or even post-modernity is reductive and ignores a traditional heritage which includes irreverent and subversive proposals in clear opposition to ruling morals and conventions.<sup>1</sup>

Kimberley Reynolds<sup>2</sup> refers to these phenomena, partially distancing herself from Jacqueline Rose's<sup>3</sup> classical reflections, when she talks about the existence of strict and accepted limits<sup>4</sup> in children's literature very much connected to taboo themes like sex and violence, or the use of a colloquial, correct linguistic register, abstaining from swear words, for example. The mythical image of childhood constructed by adults, resonating Romanticism, marked by innocence and primordial purity, also

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<sup>1</sup> David Rudd (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*. (New York: Routledge, 2010); David Rudd, *Reading the Child in Children's Literature: an Heretical Approach*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. (London: Macmillan, 1984)

<sup>4</sup> The author mentions "a set of barriers constructed which assign the limits to how far children's literature is allowed to go in upsetting a specific register of representation – one which (...) is historically delimited and formally constrained" (Rose, 1984: 139).

had an impact on the selection of those themes, forms and registers that could make the image last.

This tendency, however, does not invalidate certain literary production meant to challenge social conventions and dominant literary models. Kimberley Reynolds, in a text awarded the 2007 Book Award, *Radical Children's Literature*, analyses mostly modern and contemporary Children's literature, arguing against Rose's theory with examples of recent aesthetic transformations occurring within the field. Her study opens up the spectrum of literary genres considerably as it looks at a variety of formats (computer games, fanfiction, hybrid literature ...), piecing together an up-to-date panorama of children's literature, with an account of its innovative, experimental and even controversial character, filled with creative effervescence. The metaphor she has used to refer to innovation in children's and young adult literature is particularly meaningful, calling it the "wild zone",<sup>5</sup> within which new forms of thinking and understanding the world are explored. Of these "aesthetic changes" we are especially interested in those associated with fracturing themes, like the ones the Reynolds<sup>6</sup> looks at in Chapters 5 and 6 of her book, dedicated to "Self-harm, silence and survival: despair and trauma in children's literature" and "Baby, you're the best: sex and sexuality in contemporary juvenile fiction". In terms of form and format, besides focusing on the picturebook as an innovative genre, she analyses other types of texts she calls "transtexts",<sup>7</sup> mostly connected to communication technology, based on screen, Internet and cyberspace. For the author, they signify an evolution over previous solutions which promoted interaction between reader and book, still with exclusive recourse to the printed form, associated with the manipulation of the object-book.

More recently still, these questions were reflected upon in a collective volume, edited by Janet Evans, *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks: Creative and Critical Responses to Visual Texts*, this time dedicated to the picturebook, one of the more inventive and daring of the contemporary genres. The volume, bringing under one title some of the most relevant specialists in the study of picturebooks, focuses on the treatment of challenging themes, more or less controversial, but also on

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<sup>5</sup> Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Anticipating "transliteration", which only arises once "a balance is struck between the aesthetic and the technological opportunities provided by the new media" (idem). Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature*, 155-157.

the genre itself, polemic (or at least still under debate) as to its literary form, definition, classification, destination and reception. The reader response to these sophisticated artistic objects also comes under scrutiny in several of the articles included in the book. That post-modern picturebooks are increasingly complex, experimental and critical is made explicit through a wide array of examples and analysis of illustrative works. In 2016, Riitta Oittinen and Blanca-Ana Roig Rechou edited a book of essays regarding “difficult subjects” in children's literature. The majority of the nineteen essays collected in this volume deal with the theme of death,<sup>8</sup> war and censorship. But one of the most interesting aspects of this volume is the metaphor used in the title – *A Grey Background in Children's Literature*. The authors underline the growing presence of these subjects in the last twenty or thirty years, creating a recent trend in contemporary literary production.

The challenges of post-modernity have highlighted that experimental facet, challenging and disruptive, raising the bar of originality, complexity and readership variety:

It is in the nature of postmodern picturebooks to continue to experiment: break boundaries, question the status quo, challenge the reader/viewer, reflect technological advances, and appeal to the young.<sup>9</sup>

The evolution of Children's Literature has implied changes, more or less disruptive and fracturing, not only at the level of book themes and content, but also when it comes to form, style and language, not forgetting also the support – or medium – for reading. Increasing attention has been given to the book's materiality, understood as object and most of all as artefact, as well as an investment in the potentiality of peritextual elements. The format, the binding, the inclusion of cut pages and pop ups, the incorporation of toys and objects are just some of the more frequently occurring transformations.

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding the theme of death in children's literature, see also Lesley Clement and Jamali, Leyli (ed.). *Global Perspectives on Death in Children's Literature*. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Bette Goldstone, 'The Paradox of Space in Postmodern Picturebooks,' in *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody, and Self-referentiality*, ed. Lawrence Sipe and Sylvia Pantaleo (New York: Routledge Research in Education, 2008), 117.

It is commonly accepted that contemporary Children's Literature assiduously integrates complex themes and problematic realities, bringing out of the silence issues like sex, war or death itself. Teresa Colomer states that,

... Beyond invalidation of implicit prohibitions, the new themes in children's literature may especially mean an invitation to the reader to consider conflict as an inevitable part of life itself. And, so, the theme of facing up to pain is embodied in its various forms: disease, madness, death, disability, isolation, etc..<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary literary production for children and young adults has been called wide-ranging and inclusive, considering the themes it covers and the genres and forms that it is structured into. Closely tied to the evolution of society proper in the last few decades, literary texts written for younger audiences, in a way that does not happen in the universe of canonical literature, reflects the transformations in people's ways of thinking and being, the relationships they establish with others and the differences that characterize them, giving voice (and sometimes also colour and form) to burning issues in a social perspective, but also a cultural and political one.

In her analysis of contemporary children's picturebook representations of family, emotion, society and education, Teresa Colomer argues that children's fiction in the 70s reflects the changes happening during the 60s in terms of post-industrial society and political organization according to democratic models and systems. She proposes a social context for the plots which can be identified with:

... the middle class, especially the sector belonging to liberal professions; families in stories have become urban families, with mostly only-children, and access to well-being has been translated into a depreciation of productive labour in favour of leisure time.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Teresa Colomer, *Introducción a la literatura infantil y juvenil*. (Madrid: Editorial Síntesis, 2008), 111.

<sup>11</sup> Teresa Colomer, "La educación sentimental en los álbumes infantiles actuales", In *Actas do 6º Encontro Nacional (4º Internacional) de Investigação em Leitura, Literatura Infantil e Ilustração* edited by Fernanda Leopoldina Viana, Eduarda Coquet and Marta Martins (Braga: Universidade do Minho, 2006), 91.

The appreciation of difference and human individuality in the midst of increasingly complex social networks has gained protagonism and visibility through a set of strategies the author also enumerates.

With globalization in the twenty-first century, together with the accelerated rhythm of people's lives, a profound dependence on technology and the growing importance of consumption, texts for children will also almost immediately mirror the new social reality or at least an awareness of those transformations, on account of their fringe position in the literary universe. Children's picturebooks and YA narratives recurrently show the emotional instability of young people who feel insecure and alone in a society in constant and rapid change. Thus, Teresa Colomer states that currently books refer to

a phase of personal insecurity and awareness of the necessity of preserving the time and space of childhood, in what could be termed the new type of "children's room", like the room that oversaw the birth of children's literature – and the concept of childhood itself – in the Anglo-Saxon world.<sup>12</sup>

Themes such as war, terrorism and more recently migration (exile, diaspora, refugees etc.), in their many facets, have found paths of dialogue with the children and young adult audience, which allows for clarification, if not catharsis, of more or less latent tensions. Violence and aggressiveness, for example, sometimes connoted to racism and xenophobia, also find their space in this vast textual corpus, promoting reflexion, questioning and, hopefully, the rejection of prejudiced and stereotyped behaviour. Death, another theme considered taboo, after being eschewed for a long time from literary works meant for children, has been the focus of constant and multifaceted literary recreation. I would remind the reader, for instance, of how the Holocaust has been central in a significant group of publications destined to a wide audience from pre-readers through to teens and young adults. Marked by a tension arising from the confrontations described in them, these books focus on inventorying the consequences of war and violence, especially if unfair or unjustifiable, preventing them from becoming banal by focusing on specific cases often involving children who the readers can identify with.

Despite the greater or lesser difficulty with which these subjects are approached, the truth is that sexuality, and in particular sexuality which is

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<sup>12</sup> Teresa Colomer, "La educación sentimental", 93.

dissonant from the heteronormative paradigm, is still a universe held as almost untouchable, focused on only sporadically, at least in some countries and cultures. The problematic transposing into literature of a theme with deep sociological implications, alongside atavistic moral and religious constraints, would explain the relative silence that falls upon it, a symptom of a more general discomfort, especially when it is an unequal dialogue between children and adults.

Disseminating multifaceted, multicultural, heterogeneous and for some quite heterodox life paths and family journeys, the contemporary corpus of children's literature questions the concept of gender, so that it can be understood as the result of a coercive process of social modelling which transforms biological difference between male and female into a cultural distinction.<sup>13</sup> Since gender is a founding element of identity and configuring to a certain worldview, at the same time it promotes a transformation of the concept, its imaginary and the conventions regulating it, amplifying readers' capacity to read the world and, desirably, to change it.

The openness to new themes which has been a trait of recent decades would seem to be a result of the focus on societies and their metamorphosis, valuing behaviour that can integrate between multiple differences: ethnic, racial, ethical, religious, affective and sexual.

## **The Origin of the Book and its Organisation**

In March 2015 the eleventh edition of *The Child and the Book Conference* was organized at the University of Aveiro in Portugal. The conference was related to the theme of fracture and disruption in children's and young adult literature. The conference organizers gathered a selection of the texts presented, the publication of which provides not only a synthesis of the main reflections but also a starting point for understanding the issues of fracture and disruption within children's and young adult literature, understood as an innovative, constantly evolving literary system.

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<sup>13</sup> Consol Aguilar, "Del discurso de la domesticidad a la cultura queer en la literatura infantil y juvenil". In *¿Todas las mujeres podemos?: Género, desarrollo y multiculturalidad. III Congreso estatal de la Fundación Isonomía para la igualdad de oportunidades entre mujeres y hombres* (Castelló: Universitat Jaume I), p. 62-69.



From the ample range of fracturing themes, special attention was given to studies related to violence, war, sexuality and politics. Fracture and rupture were also looked at from the formal-stylistic perspective, analysing questions of language and register for example, or the point of view of genre, analysing fringe works or hybrid literary forms that are often at the vanguard of literary production, as is the case with IT applications or increasingly multimodal post-modern picturebooks. The issue of the audience and differences between intended audiences, associated with the crossover universe, also received lively reflection in that it questioned the very concept of children's literature, which is becoming broader and more indistinct.

The relative newness and originality of this theme but also its relevance and pertinence in current times, make it especially forceful when associated with developments in contemporary children's literature. Focusing on fracture and disruption, here understood in a broad sense, meant it was possible to include in the selection of texts the study of disturbing themes like violence, death or sexuality, but also poverty, exile and other forms of child suffering.

From the point of view of education then, fracture is also a valuable topic to reflect upon, especially when we consider an increasingly multicultural, multilingual and multi-ethnic society. Children's Literature can not only help to recreate society but also find ways of building dialogue and bridges, in a logic of discovering diversity to integrate it. But reflection on the presence of disruptive themes in children's literature allows the identification of works that, due to certain aesthetic or formative qualities, could be integrated into selections of recommended reading, making them more diverse and enriched with innovative and original contributions, promoting the spread of knowledge on a given theme.

We should not forget that children's literature, as argued by Gemma Luch,<sup>14</sup> is also a literature which, beyond offering the reader artistic entertainment, seeks also to create and develop certain competences: linguistic, narrative, ideological, symbolic, cultural, or others, in the perspective of plural literacy. Its peripheral status, on the fringe of the literary system, exposes it very clearly to society's interferences and

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<sup>14</sup> Gemma Luch, *Análisis de narrativas infantiles y juveniles*. (Cuenca, Publicaciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2003).

evolutive tendencies, in an effort to adjust to its preferred reader, making the study of the relationships established between children's literature and its contemporary universe of particular interest and impact in multiple areas. Its peripheral or marginal character allows it to circulate "under the cultural radar and so is able to cross any number of official and unofficial boundaries".<sup>15</sup> For this author, the innovative vitality of children's lit resides in, among other things, the fact that this art form acts simultaneously in two semiotic systems, the textual and the visual, apart from its relationship to the format and support of literary communication.

The book now being published is a collection of 17 chapters authored by 19 researchers from 12 countries, a show of the diversity and variety of proposals, particularly in the European context. Special reference should be given to the fact that some of these come from lesser-known countries and literatures, sometimes also seen as peripheral and marginal, thus promoting their study and international recognition given the wide audience foreseen for the publication. The volume gathers texts from consolidated figures within the field of research in Children's Literature, such as David Rudd, Sandra Beckett or Hans-Heino Ewers, with contributions from junior researchers, creating bridges and dialogue between both generations and critical and theoretical approaches. The diversity of proposals, themes and approaches, far from closing the topic rather illustrate the research potential it still has and opens doors to further analysis, developing study in an area which has increasingly caught the attention of not only specialists but also the general public, particularly teachers, librarians and mediators of reading.

The book is divided into four parts and starts with the question of **Challenging Established Notions of Children's Literature**, with reflections from David Rudd, Hans-Heino Ewers, Sandra Beckett and Maciej Skowera.

While the first chapter, "Forever Fractious: Probing Children's Literature's Faultlines", ponders the implications of disruption in children's literature, giving both positive and negative examples, Hans-Heino Ewers, "For Children? For Adults? Multiple Addressing of Children's Literature in the Past and the Present", and Sandra Beckett, "Boundary-breaking Crossover Picturebooks Disrupting a Genre", give us reflections on the concept of crossover literature, specifically the

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<sup>15</sup> Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature*, 15.

persistence of the concept of a global audience and the eminently disruptive nature of contemporary picturebooks. Maciej Skowera, in "Fracturing the Canon: Towards Adulterated Children's Literature", discusses the phenomenon of 'adulterated children's literature', understood as 'adult' works which disrupt the rules of children's fiction.

The second part, **Fracturing Themes: War & Violence. Loss & Trauma**, is a longer section and is composed of six articles which reflect upon themes such as terrorism and its impact, civil war and its memories, colonial imperialism and its propagation through literature, abandonment and neglect, refugees and integration, or solitude and loss. The challenging nature of the themes selected, some outright controversial, shows clearly that there are no limits or barriers to literary production intended for children or young adults. Åse Marie Ommundsen, in "Norwegian Children's Literature in the Aftermath of the 22nd July: Collective Memory and Trauma Relief", reflects upon the consequences of a terrorist attack in several discourses aimed at children. Maria Pujol-Valls studies the representations of Spanish Civil War in order to raise awareness of the recent past among children and young adults, in a text entitled "Violence in the Distance: Preserving the Collective Memory in Catalan Children's and Young Adult Fiction". The historical perspective is also present in Gabriela Fragoso's text, "Colonisation Taught to Youngsters: Fractures and Disruptions in the Transition of Literature from the Late Eighteenth Century to the Literature of the German Empire", where she analyses some evidences of the ideological fracture and disruption which occurred in German young adult literature at that time. Ben Screech reflects upon Brooks' exploration of homelessness, related with drug use, poverty and family breakdown, in "Like Things That Don't Fit – Homelessness in the Fiction of Kevin Brooks". Cansu Oranç and Ilgim Veryeri Alaca, in "The Case of Tarik and the White Crow: Refugee Children Bridging Gaps via Picturebooks" propose the experience of picturebook construction as a support to help the integration of refugee children, by presenting a concrete experience. Finally, Tzina Kalogirou analyses Shaun Tan's *Rules of Summer* through the relationship between utopia and dystopia concepts, in "Fracturing Utopia/Dislocating Dystopia: A Close Reading of *Rules of Summer* by Shaun Tan".

The third part is dedicated to the issue of **Disruptive Identities**, with four reflections on teenage identity issues and their literary representation, post-modern narrative composition either in terms of recurrent use of metafictional strategies, or recourse to parody in re-writing fairy tales, and

representations of homoparentality in children's texts. Iris Schaefer analyses the mirror as a symbol of fractured identity in German young adult literature, in "Mirroring the Self – Disrupted Identities in German Adolescent-Literature". Diana Navas reflects upon the metafiction phenomenon as a way to increase reader's competences and abilities, by analysing a corpus of Brazilian children's literature in "Metafictional Strategies: Disruptions in Contemporary Brazilian Children's Literature". In "New Subjects, Disrupted Principles: Fractured Fairy Tales in a Postmodern Reality. Selected Examples from Poland", Weronika Kostecka analyses the implications of Postmodernism in the contemporary Polish fairy tale through the use of intertextuality, metafiction and subversion. Finally, Valeria Illuminati analyses the representation of alternative families in picturebooks published by Lo Stampatello, an Italian publishing house in "'Speak to Me in Capital Letters!': Same-Sex Parenting, New Families and Homosexuality in Italian and Translated Picturebooks by Lo Stampatello".

The volume closes with three chapters in a section entitled **Contemporary Trends in Children's Books: Fracturing the Traditional Way of Reading**. Each chapter discusses new book formats and consequently new ways of reading – the game-book, the interactive-book, hybrid or multimodal narratives and digital literature. Sara Reis da Silva deals with the specificity of game-books and interactive reading in "Play in Narratives For Children: on the 'Rules' of a New Fiction". Susanne Reichl's analysis of Brian Selznick's work, in "Turning Brian Selznick's Pages: A Multimodal Celebration of the Verbal and the Visual", underlines the discontinuity in the narrative and the implications of intermediality in order to establish coherence. Finally, in "Disruptive or Imitative? Literary APPS for Young Children", Neus Real and Cristina Correro question the implications of digital reading by analysing a significant corpus of apps aimed at children.

The chapters collected here pay testament to the vitality of children's literature, but also the study and research emanating from it, underlining how fracture and disruption has marked its evolution in different ways.

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**PART I:**  
**CHALLENGING ESTABLISHED NOTIONS  
OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

CHAPTER ONE

FOREVER FRACTIOUS:  
PROBING CHILDREN'S  
LITERATURE'S FAULTLINES

DAVID RUDD

**Abstract**

This paper gives an overview of disruptive children's texts through the ages before analysing what are the implications of disruption, both positive (challenging existing censorship and prejudices) and negative (supporting reactionary stances). It then looks more closely at the way that children's books, as a generic construction developed by the middle classes in the eighteenth century, have helped to develop and perpetuate a rather restricted view of what is appropriate for the figure of the child – the standard child itself usually being male, middle class and white. While innovative authors struggle against these conventions, the power of the status quo needs to be continually reckoned with. Examples of problems with representing an empowered child are given, alongside the difficult issue of representing child abuse in a disruptive manner that is ultimately positive. Finally, it is acknowledged that appreciating minority groups also involves coming to terms with those we might find objectionable and reactionary.

**Introduction**

It is not difficult to stumble across examples of children's literature's disruptive tendencies. They hit the news regularly, as for example, with the UK's rather conservative *Daily Mail* protesting in January 2013 about what it termed "sick lit ... a disturbing phenomenon" involving "Tales of teenage cancer, self-harm and suicide...", finding unacceptable titles like John Davies' *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), a sensitive and witty novel dealing with teenagers with cancer (from which about 86,000 die each year,



worldwide).<sup>1</sup> But issues like “sick lit” are newsworthy, of course, only because children's books are usually conceptualised rather differently. These works are seen to offend by stepping across some invisible line, for children's books are generally defined in negative, evaluative terms – as by the *Daily Mail* – as what they should *not* be. Thus, a few years earlier, Anne Fine made a similar comment about this invisible line:

In the Fifties ... there was always a rescue at the end of the book and it was always a middle-class rescue. ... That was felt to be unrealistic and so there was a move away from that. Books for children became much more concerned with realism, or what we see as realism. [...] It may be that realism has gone too far in literature for children.<sup>2</sup>

There is some irony here, though, as Fine herself had also been accused of going too far, with works like *The Tulip Touch* (1996; on bullying) or *The Road of Bones* (2006), which details a child, Yuri, coming to terms with the horrific results of communism under Stalin. Yuri ends up in a labour camp where he is forced to help build the infamous M56, where the bodies of those who died became part of the road's foundations. Holding on to this macabre image, though, if we were also to lay, end to end, all the pronouncements about individual children's books being disruptive, we would have a very long highway.

## A History of Disruption

Let me begin, then, with a trot through history, taking a look at how children's books have been disruptive. Starting with the present, we are probably all familiar with *Tous à Poil!* (Franek and Daniau, 2011) or “All Naked”, thanks largely to the French UMP (*Union pour un mouvement populaire*) politician Jean-Francois Copé, who found his blood “curdled” by the book, as he announced on French television, commenting, “at some point... we're going to have to stop to think about what we're doing to our children”<sup>3</sup>. Franek and Daniau's work shows various people stripping off

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<sup>1</sup> Tanith Carey, “The “sick-lit” books aimed at children ...”, *Daily Mail*, 3 Jan 2013. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2256356/The-sick-lit-books-aimed-children-Its-disturbing-phenomenon-Tales-teenage-cancer-self-harm-suicide-.html>

<sup>2</sup> Neill Graeme, ‘Fine attacks “too realistic” children's Literature’, *The Bookseller*, 25 August 2009. <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/fine-attacks-too-realistic-childrens-literature>

<sup>3</sup> Clémentine Beauvais, ‘Children's literature and the current political situation in France’, February 12, 2014, translated in her blog, *A Blog about Childhood*,

and, in a celebration of bodily diversity, entering the sea. It thus criticizes modern notions that there is one, proper body shape, instead returning us to an Edenic state where nakedness is not shameful (though the work is perhaps guilty of not respecting the views of different faiths).

At a similar time, another issue was disrupting middle-American sensibilities, as captured in *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson, Parnell and Cole, 2005), which has turned out to be the most consistently challenged book in the USA between 2006 and 10. As you might also know, it is based on a true story, about two male penguins in New York Zoo, who built a nest, hatched an egg and raised the chick, Tango. Ideologically, though, many saw the book as having a more nefarious purpose: to promote single-sex marriage and homosexuality – and, thereby, to erode traditional family values. Of course, Babette Cole, the English writer and illustrator, with a long history of being disruptive, had earlier combined both nakedness and sex in what seemed to be a children’s version of the *Kama Sutra*.<sup>4</sup>

Harry Potter’s problems were of a different nature for, as many have commented, there is a curious absence of sex amongst Potters’ adolescent friends. It was the supernatural and satanic elements that caused this series’ frequent banning (again, mainly in the US). And yet, if you read Johanna Michaelsen’s *Like Lambs to the Slaughter: Your Child and the Occult* (1989), you’ll discover that ‘Harry Potter’ is not alone in its devilish powers, other, well-known satanic culprits being ‘My Little Pony’, the ‘Care Bears’ and those blue devils, the Smurfs!<sup>5</sup> It has to be said, though, that today there is generally more openness about bodily functions – and scatology generally – unless, that is, that function is to have sex.

Moving back in time, *Heather has Two Mummies* (Newman, 1989) and its male equivalent, *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* (Bösche, 1981), have become legendary for featuring single sex parents (females and males, respectively). Slightly earlier, in the 1970s, Judy Blume was queen of disruption, and also in this decade, *Go Ask Alice* (Anonymous, 1971) caused controversy, being marketed as a true diary about Alice’s world of

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*Stories and Education*, <http://www.clementinebeauvais.com/eng/category/books/> . Accessed March 9 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Babette Cole, *Mummy Laid an Egg!* (London: Red Fox, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Johanna Michaelsen, *Like Lambs to the Slaughter: Your Child and the Occult*. (Irvine, CA: Harvest House, 1989).

sex, rape, prostitution and drugs, ending in Alice's death. The book was published anonymously, and, in many ways, is an old-fashioned cautionary tale. It is certainly disruptive, but is it more so when we learn that it was a con – written by a psychologist?

A year earlier, Maurice Sendak – controversial from the very beginning – had run into censorship problems with his dreamlike, psychoanalytically rich story, *In the Night Kitchen* (1970). Again, we are back with nudity, with some librarians, reputedly, tippexing diapers, or nappies, on him, suggesting, indeed, that either he had problems with bladder/bowel control, or he had truly regressed in the course of the night. Nowadays, of course, Captain Underpants could come to the librarians' rescue! Sendak, though, was not amused; as he put it:

Librarians objected to *Night Kitchen* because the boy is nude. They told me you can't have a penis in a book for children; it frightens them. Yet parents take their children to museums where they see Roman statues with their dicks broken off. You'd think that would frighten them more.<sup>6</sup>

We could go along this highway a lot further, but as most of the concerns are repetitive, I'm going to skip back to the penny dreadfuls, which certainly tick the box, being so disreputable that they are ignored in many histories of children's literature, although they were by far the most popular reading material of young people across much of the nineteenth century. *The Wild Boys of London*, or *The Children of Night* (Anonymous, 1866), was one of the most notorious, featuring violence, ghoulish material, and nudity – and was not untypical, except that it was virulently prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act. Earlier still there had been *Varney the Vampyre*; or *The Feast of Blood* (Rymer and Prest, 1847), which also raised questions in Parliament. I mention this work because it was the forerunner of today's fairly respectable vampire fiction, establishing many of today's conventions, such as having two, fanged teeth which leave two tell-tale bite marks. At the time, it was also seen as disruptive because it represented the upper-classes as decadent, and this was in the revolutionary 1840s. It is also worth mentioning that the final work was 667,000 words long, making it far larger than *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* and, therefore, certainly not a text to be tackled by anyone who had problems with literacy.

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<sup>6</sup> Selma G. Lanes, *The Art of Maurice Sendak* (New York: Abrams, 1984), 189.

The 1840s, though, can not be left without mentioning one of the most celebrated disruptive books of all time: *Struwwelpeter* (1845/48). Taken seriously, it is scandalous, but more amusing when seen as a spoof on the many cautionary tales around at the time – like the very popular *History of the Fairchild Family* (1818) by Mrs Sherwood, where another child plays with candles and catches fire; and, elsewhere, the children are taken to a gibbet to see how family quarrels can lead to fratricide. The book stayed in print for more than a century and, although this is one that many of us might find unhealthily disruptive today, readers’ reactions to the text suggests it was not necessarily received in the ways intended. Lord Frederic Hamilton thus praised it because “there was plenty about eating and drinking; one could always skip the prayers, and there were three or four very brightly written accounts of funerals in it”.<sup>7</sup> Children, in short, might well read differently – and, of course, different children, differently again.

Going back even further, it is also an irony that *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) was ever seen as suitable for children, given that it has been described, even for adults, using exactly the same word that Anne Fine used for Burgess’s books: “filthy in word, filthy in thought, ... and obscene”. *Gulliver* was obviously much abridged for children, but then as a recent adapter, James Riordan states, “As recently as 1915 the Clarendon Press felt it necessary to omit passages from the original (adult) version” too. However, Riordan continues, “But OUP permits me to retain Gulliver attending to his (torrential and wheelbarrow-ful) needs of nature in Lilliput, and describing the naked flesh of giant ladies in Brobdingnag ....”, tellingly adding: “It is I, however, who omit the tiny Gulliver riding on the nipple of a 16-year-old maid of honour, for fear of offending adult taste (children would enjoy it)”.<sup>8</sup> And the latest film version does the same!

But I’ll finish this historical trawl with an even more incendiary work: *The Protestant Tutor*. This purports to be teaching literacy but it also has a strong, anti-papist message, as the title page declares: “The Protestant Tutor, instructing Youth, and others, in the compleat method of Spelling, Reading and writing True English; also, discovering to them the Notorious

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<sup>7</sup> Marion Lochhead, *Their First Ten Years: Victorian Childhood* (London: John Murray, 1956), 51.

<sup>8</sup> James Riordan, “Gulliver in the Space Age”, *Books for Keeps*, 71, Nov. 1991. <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/printpdf/issue/71/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/gulliver-in-the-space-age>

Errors, damnable doctrines, and cruel massacres of the Bloody Papists... etc".<sup>9</sup> Today such a book obviously disrupts our sensibilities, but at the time many would have found the accusations ideologically sound, and, no doubt, many children would also have savoured the gruesome depictions, as gruesome as any penny dreadfuls.

## Genre and Disruption

What should have emerged from the above, then, is – first – that different things are disruptive for different audiences, and secondly, that disruption can be either positive or negative – or, indeed, both. For example, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1852) was a huge success, and credited with hastening the abolition of slavery (positive), although we might now find its depiction of racial stereotypes unacceptable (negative). Thirdly, and lastly, we have seen that what disturbs adult gatekeepers is often not what worries children. However, it is usually only the former that count, with adults speaking on the child's behalf (as, of necessity, do writers), seeking to socialise their readers into particular ideological positions. This is a topic that I shall explore in more detail later.

Before that, though, I want to explore a key, related issue; namely, the idea that children's literature is a genre – as most eloquently spelt out in Perry Nodelman's *The Hidden Adult*, where he suggests that its

...defining characteristics can be accounted for by conventional assumptions about and constructions of childhood. The issue here is not what children do actually like or do need. It is how adult perceptions of what children like or need shape the literature that adults provide for children in ways that provide it with distinct markers that allow it to be identified as a genre.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from my general objection to the notion that children's literature is a genre, I want to pick up on Nodelman's idea that perceptions of childhood came first, thence informing the development of children's literature; rather, I think it is cultural products like children's books that actually help to define – and construct (or “constrict”) – the child. Moreover, this construction began as a very narrow version of childhood,

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<sup>9</sup> Originally 1713. For a copy of the title page, see [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lessons\\_for\\_Children](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lessons_for_Children).

<sup>10</sup> Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 188.

one created by the middle classes as they came to power with the rise of capitalism. This emerging class could, for the first time, afford to keep its children apart in a separate sphere, with their own possessions and defining culture, part of which included a growing number of children's books. It sought to remove from view what it saw as the less desirable elements of a wider culture. Thus the more racy versions of fairy tales and nursery rhymes were removed, and Christian elements increasingly featured, along with polite and deferential children.

My contention is that this new, generic notion of children's books sought to delimit 'children's' pleasure in a wider range of texts. Undoubtedly this enjoyment persisted, but only outside what was now, officially, children's literature. It also led to a type of reverse engineering, where for many people it was the child as represented in culture – and in children's books especially – that was retroactively used as the measure of what children were 'really' like. So, in Foucauldian terms, the more that children's book publishing became an established institution, grading children by reading ability and age, the more children's reading became restricted – and restrictive. Outside the genre of children's literature, of course, things were very different, with children being exposed to a number of other discourses – some of which survive the onslaught of middle-class rewriting. Thus a fairy and folktale tradition lived on orally – such that, even today, most fairy tales have protagonists that are not themselves children. Moreover, a tradition of nursery rhymes and nonsense verse also continued outside the generic strait-jacket – again, often not with child protagonists at all, besides featuring highly 'unacceptable' topics. Lastly, much of children's oral literature was often seen as even more unacceptable.

Much of this popular cultural material had been passed on through chapbooks and the penny dreadfuls, which were far more popular than any middle-class classics like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Traces of such literature were to survive in more earthy, working-class representations of children's culture, as celebrated in characters from comics like the *Dandy* and *Beano*. Mention should also be made of that more official source of tales of massacre, murder, fratricide, sex, erotica and rape; namely, the Bible.

The point I'm making is that children were not only *exposed* to this range of material (as they are to TV soaps and news programmes today), but, in some cases, were actively *encouraged* to consume it. Thus school