

Review Article

The Politics of Children's Reading

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IN *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood*, J. A. Appleyard¹ asks how one becomes a reader and what it means at different stages of life to be a reader. He asks whether a pattern of development exists, and proceeds to find one. Aware of the distance between the way literature is taught in college classrooms and the way his students want to read, Appleyard argues that a developmental view of reading, one in which the psychological development of readers is approached from a literary point of view, will help teachers understand more about what happens in their classrooms. Assuming that we "respond differently to what we read as we mature and become more experienced and skilled as readers" (8), he asks why. Supposedly, his exploration "provide[s] a useful framework for thinking about how we teach literature" (3), but the resulting study marginalizes the teaching of literature in favour of a focus on the reading of it. Although Appleyard relies on transactional models, his reader seems to develop almost in spite of his or her teachers. Furthermore, this reader may or may not ever attend university; the chapter on college teaching of literature occupies only a small place in the construction of the reader.

The construction that Appleyard provides is based on both the research that exists on readers and his own interviews with sixty adults about their reading. It borrows from Northrop Frye's genre theory, transactional theories of reading, Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, and Eric Erikson's concept of life cycles. Although he continually pays lip service to the significance of cultural factors in the development of this reader, the result is curiously ahistorical. The reader has no race and seems

rarely touched by other kinds of difference such as class, ethnicity, nationality, and generation. References to the importance of social context are numerous, but Appleyard does not even discuss the many different social contexts in which readers develop in the U.S., other than noting the difference between the development of the English major and the adult who is neither an English major nor even a college graduate. Although his reader is meticulously acknowledged to be both male and female, the problems the female reader might have with adventure fiction, for example, are quickly dismissed. His careful use of "he" and "she" does not accord with the undefined "we readers" who inhabit his text. This use of pronouns becomes even more irritating when it slides into the patronizing third-person plural, as when he discusses the conventionality of children's literature:

Conventional values, type characters, simple plots and one-sided ideals are exactly what ten- or eleven-year-olds expect to find in stories. Indeed, they are what they need to find in them if the stories are to be at all satisfying or meaningful to them, because this is the way the world looks as far as they have succeeded in putting it together for themselves.

Are all children so satisfied by "conventional values"? What values? Which children? In Appleyard's model, the only readers with any choices about how and why they read are adults, and even they, if they develop successfully, eventually arrive at the existential and comic point of view described in his conclusion. To get there, they move through five reader roles: in early childhood, the reader as player; in later childhood, the reader as hero or heroine; in adolescence, the reader as thinker; in college, the reader as interpreter; and in adulthood, the reader as pragmatist finally free to choose his or her reasons for reading. Appleyard criticizes Piaget's cognitive theory for its inability to deal positively with fantasy and for its universalizing. Yet, despite his qualifiers about the need to look at cultural and social influences, the very structure he uses makes it hard to avoid universalizing. No matter how much he acknowledges that the categories he is using "do not describe the unique experience of an individual reader" (15), or his assertion that the pattern is flexible, the model does imply a right and wrong way to read. If

the student in the college classroom resists becoming reader as interpreter, and says she is quite content being reader as heroine, how does Appleyard's model help either student or instructor?

The limitations of the model are particularly evident in the three chapters on children and adolescence. Is it really true that "Interpretation first becomes a matter of concern to older juveniles and adolescents" (18) and that young readers do not interpret their stories? His examples of children's reading are very dated, so much so that C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (published in 1950) is referred to as "more recent" (61). Citing surveys that lump all children's reading into information books and adventure/romance, Appleyard not only accepts the conclusions of this research, but also agrees that such reading is appropriate, because children are all the same (so much for social factors), they are unable to deal with tragedy or irony, they cannot handle characters who are both good and evil, they are not interested in the inner feelings of characters and "for obvious reasons" do not care for "commentary, description, allusion, and rhetoric" (75).

In contrast, Appleyard's college students do not care for theory. Although they learn to see the text as problematic, Appleyard keeps noting how "uninterested in theory many professional students and teachers are" (146), and he reveals his own bias in references to the limitations of "ideological" readings in comparison to the richness of "productive reading" (151). He seems unable to accept that a real reader, for example, a real feminist reader, may actually find an ideological reading productive and be unable to imagine any reading that is not ideological. It is that kind of reader who is marginalized in his text, for theory becomes a stage that the reader passes through. (One suspects that the implications for thinking about what we do in the classroom lie in our recognition of this fact.)

In the end, all adult readers seem pragmatic. That is, when professors use theory, they make eclectic use of whatever seems most productive at the time. When Appleyard discusses three common motives for adult reading—escaping, discovering the truth about the world, finding usable images—he categorizes reading (perhaps unintentionally) as a private, apolitical activity.

He may say that comedy is “the context out of which a genuinely political criticism of literature can take place” (190), but this reader, for one, is left unconvinced of the possibility of political criticism when according to Appleyard most “of us are not very interested in explicating the theories behind what we read” (146).

Turning from *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood* to two collections of critical essays only emphasizes how much more complicated and interesting the world of children’s literature is when it is not regarded simply as a stage. Except for the occasional reference to fairy tales, Appleyard hardly mentions nineteenth-century British literature, or specifically Romanticism. Yet the eleven essays in James McGavran’s *Romanticism and Children’s Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*² argue for the influence of Romanticism on not just our construction of the child but the way we still construct children’s literature. McGavran’s introduction sets the tone by noting the romantic conflict over childhood, the tension between “exaltation and abuse” (2) of the child, and the social conditions of the early nineteenth century that contributed to the interest in childhood. The essays range from Coleridge, to three on Wordsworth and one on the latter’s influence on George MacDonald. Over half the essays examine Victorian and Edwardian writers, and, in contrast to the traditional history of Romantics as male poets, McGavran’s collection includes five essays on women writers.

In contrast to Appleyard’s psychological approach to the reader, McGavran’s collection suggests that if “we” read differently today, that difference is grounded in an awareness of politics. We respond differently not because we mature, but because we choose different theoretical models. Typical of the way the collection rereads earlier readings is Alan Richardson’s “Wordsworth, Fairy Tales, and the Politics of Children’s Reading.” Richardson challenges the Romantics’ dualistic model of “instruction and delight, reason and fantasy” (36) that has so influenced the histories of children’s literature, histories that hail the arrival of fairy tales as the real stuff and dismiss the opponents of fairy tales as misguided, didactic moralists. Such histories subscribe to a

progressive narrative that ignores both the way the didactic tradition often appropriates the fairy tale and the politically conservative motives behind the Romantic endorsement of the fairy tale. He notes how Wordsworth's "valorization of the fairy tale can be shown to rely on a conservative, traditionalist conception of 'oral literature' which . . . has long been discredited" (37) and yet still determines those histories. In this political reading, the fairy tale is not the door to the imagination but just another way of controlling the new mass reading public, "a harmless, pacifying alternative to radical intellectualism" (42). Richardson is particularly astute in noting how critics still persist in the Romantic idealization of the fairy tale, and in his call for rethinking the role of childhood in this period.

Richardson's project is thus sympathetic to feminist rereading of the female moralists. In "Romancing the Moral Tale: Maria Edgeworth and the Problematics of Pedagogy," Mitzi Myers offers such a rereading. She too attacks children's literature historians such as Harvey Darton for their Whiggish perspective and binary hierarchy in which fantasy and the fairy tale are superior to moral tales. In a reading of Edgeworth's "Simple Susan," Myers looks at how Edgeworth remothers herself in the story and inscribes a "maternal ideology" (99) in her text. Unlike critics who see Edgeworth as only the daughter of the father, Myers sees a dual inscription, both paternal and maternal. Unlike Apleyard, she sees both child and children's literature as "shifting cultural constructs" (111), and argues for the need to read texts in their cultural specificity.

Myers notes the connection between "Simple Susan" and Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. Phyllis Bixler, in "Gardens, Houses, and Nurturant Power in *The Secret Garden*," offers her own rereading, this time in response to feminist criticism of the closure of the text and the heroine's changing role. Arguing the need to move beyond "Images of Women" criticism, Bixler looks at the garden as the female voice and shows how its spirit gradually takes over the patriarchal house. Finding a community of mothers at work in the text, she acknowledges that the novel accepts the class system. Certainly Mrs. Sowerby is the ideal nurturant, uncomplaining mother, very much in the literary

tradition of the contented poor. But in the end when Bixler refers to the "secret plot" (222) and identifies this plot with *écriture féminine*, we need to remember that this powerful mother is conveniently dead. If the pleasure of *The Secret Garden* lies in the chance to hear the mother's voice and explore her body, readers who are still living mothers may be right to be disturbed.

Not all the essays respond to feminist concerns. Patricia Demers, in "Mrs. Sherwood and Hesba Stretton: The Letter and the Spirit of Evangelical Writing of and for Children," questions stereotypes about Evangelicals and writes to reclaim Sherwood and Stretton as Romantic Evangelicals. She notes in passing that both authors "disappoint theoretical arguments about gender as a means of depriving women of authority and speech" (131). Judith Plotz, in "A Victorian Comfort Book: Juliana Ewing's *The Story of a Short Life*," contextualizes the Victorian obsession with childhood death. Given that statistics describe a falling mortality rate in the nineteenth century, such an obsession seems ill-timed, but Plotz points out that infant mortality remained high until after 1900. The obsession with death, the need for comfort, she traces to the Romantic valuing of the child paired with the growing failure of religious faith to offer adequate consolation. In the Romantic view, childhood is a type of life, no longer marginal or probationary. It is also connected with vitality and Nature; hence the need for particular strategies of consolation in the "rash of 'Comfort Books,'" (176) that appear after 1840. The child's death needs to be explained; it can no longer just be accepted.

Something else that Plotz needs to explain is the continuing popularity of Kipling. Appleyard may not mention Kipling's books, but Plotz, guest editor of *Children's Literature*, 20: Special Issue on Rudyard Kipling,³ begins with a justification, "Why the Kipling Issue Was Made," in which she notes that despite, or because of, his "thick-skinned imperialism" (viii), Kipling's major works for children, *Just So Stories*, *The Jungle Books*, and *Kim*, have always been in print. The nine essays and ten reviews suggest some of the reasons why. Many of them also continue Plotz's need for justification, as though in choosing to write on Kipling one is compelled to explain one's choice.

The answers fall into two categories. Although no one defends Kipling's politics, several writers place those politics in context. For example, John Murray, in "The Law of *The Jungle Books*," argues that Kipling's concept of law is modelled on that of the analytical positivists; that is, there is no ethical dimension to this concept. Murray suggests that modern readers expect a connection between ethics and law and so do not know how to reconcile this ethical absence with the stories' didacticism. The essay concludes with a reminder of the construction of empire and the identity of Kipling's readers: "Kipling's law was never intended to make his readers good. Rather, it was intended to make them safe citizens at home and effective rulers in the colonies" (12). Similarly, Judith Plotz, in "The Empire of Youth: Crossing and Double-Crossing Cultural Barriers in Kipling's *Kim*," points to the tensions and contradictions of the little friend of the world who is also the spy and betrayer of friendship. Carole Scott, in "Kipling's Combat Zones: Training Grounds in the Mowgli Stories, *Captains Courageous*, and *Stalky & Co.*," reminds her readers that Kipling did not invent the metaphor of war as game. Like U. C. Knoepfelmacher in "Female Power and Male Self-Assertion: Kipling and the Maternal," Scott probes the relationship between Kipling's attitude to the feminine and his view of the world. Where Scott sees Kipling's need to suppress the feminine, Knoepfelmacher argues that Kipling's adult and children's fiction "differ markedly in their orientation toward female nurturance and female power" (17). He constructs a Kipling who, as male writer, had to adopt the mother's power in order to survive.

Other essays justify their attention to Kipling through various more traditional defences of the artist, for example, William Blackburn's review, which urges critics "to assess Kipling not as a huckster of empire (which he never in fact was), but as a writer" (176). Brian Alderson draws attention to the uniqueness of Kipling's illustrations and commentary to the *Just So Stories*. Corinne McCutchan reads *Puck of Pook's Hill* and *Rewards and Fairies* as structurally very like medieval and renaissance romance cycles; Juliet McMaster writes on the Trinity archetype in *The Jungle Books* and *The Wizard of Oz*; and Howard Cell compares the quest of the Elephant's child to the Socratic pilgrimage for

wisdom. D.H. Stewart, in "Stalky and the Language of Education," examines the novel in terms of orality/literacy theory as well as the influence of Friedrich Froebel. In essence, Stewart offers an aesthetic defence of Kipling and seems to write as an adult rediscovering the pleasure of language: "our initial pleasure in reading comes from recalling our own thrill at language acquisition, verbal play" (46). Initial pleasure suggests other pleasures, the complexity of any reading act. The adult readers who write on children's literature, both in the McGavran collection and in the Kipling essays, develop many narratives that, in comparison to Appleyard, may be far more useful in the classroom as well as more sensitive to the political decisions we make in becoming readers.

NOTES

- 1 J. A. Appleyard, S.J. *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. pp. x, 228. \$34.50.
- 2 James Holt McGavran, Jr., ed. *Romanticism and Children's Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*. Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1991. pp. 265. \$35.00.
- 3 *Children's Literature*, 20: Annual of the Modern Language Association Division on Children's Literature and The Children's Literature Association. Special Issue on Rudyard Kipling. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992. pp. viii, 256. \$45.00; \$15.00 pb.