

Book Reviews

Jack Zipes. *Creative Storytelling: Building Community Changing Lives*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995. Pp. xii, 267. \$55.00, \$16.95 pb.

In *Creative Storytelling: Building Community Changing Lives*, Jack Zipes claims to have written an anti-manual, a guide for teachers and storytellers in which he shares his experiences based on twenty years' storytelling in North American and European schools. Suspicious of manuals that "pretend to offer the ultimate solution to a problem or the definite way to cure a malady" (2), Zipes believes that North American education is facing two particular dangers, dangers that creative storytelling can address. The first is the danger of a rigid move towards "standardization of curricula in the name of cultural literacy" (2); the second is a more ironic danger, the one posed when the current renaissance of storytelling in the US and Europe has meant no more than making the storyteller one more product to be sold in the marketplace.

If Zipes has an agenda, it is to use storytelling to challenge that commercialization. Focusing on children ages 6 to 10, he wants to counter their training as good little consumers by offering an alternate model of community, a model based on the premise that the storyteller is not the mysterious, exceptional being, the one blessed with the gift of story, whose brief appearance in the schoolroom comes with all the glamour of a star's performance, but a long-term member of the community who teaches children how to take control and become makers of their own stories. The storyteller is subversive, teaching children the possibilities of what Herbert Kohl calls "creative maladjustment" (17). Children learn to "*play* with the prescribed models, principles, canons, and standards" (4) that society has validated, and in the process learn that canons and standards are ideological constructs that can be challenged and do evolve.

For example, Zipes tells children traditional European fairytales, often beginning his sessions with those tales, not because they are the "correct" versions, but because only knowledge of the dominant versions will provide children with the tools to appropriate and contest their meanings:

It is important, I believe, for the children to hear or read a classical tale that they are "supposed" to know . . . even though I personally may find the tale sexist, racist, or abusive to children in some way. (17)

The race, class, and gender issues that disturb us in canonical tales are not for Zipes a reason to abandon these tales; despite his objections to much of the content of the tales, Zipes emphasizes that fairytales have remained influential because they are at heart utopian, celebrating "the capacity of people from all walks of life to survive disaster and change their lives" (78). To recover this utopian potential, children need to learn how to play with the tales. But before they can question the universality of certain narrative rules, children must first recognize what those rules are, and this is something Zipes believes works best with the canonical tales that children, through popular culture, are likely to know already. Such a project requires that the storyteller be part of the school community for several months. The storyteller who merely performs once in the classroom may impress the children, but there is little likelihood of radically transforming them in the way Zipes proposes.

Hence, having insisted in the "Introduction" that he is not writing a manual, Zipes proceeds to describe in the main eleven chapters the programme that has worked for him. An authority on traditional and contemporary fairytales (the bibliography lists four of his critical books and three of his collections), Zipes begins his classroom work with fairytales, starting with "Little Red Riding Hood." He first asks the children what versions of the story they can recount. Then Zipes tells them Charles Perrault's influential 1697 version, which Zipes flatly declares "is a story about rape in which the girl bears the responsibility for her own murder and the violent death of her grandmother" (23). Not many children know this version anymore, but they also know neither the earlier version in which the heroine outwits the wolf without the help of any adult, nor any of the contemporary feminist retellings or the versions from non-European cultures that Zipes also tells them. In *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, Zipes discusses the ideological implications of the many changes this tale has undergone. By telling the children several versions, then moving to drama, drawing, and writing, he moves the children to play "what if" games, games that encourage them to question the versions they know, and arrive at essentially what he accomplishes in the scholarly work he writes for adults. He begins storytelling with this tale because Perrault's ending is so shocking: "From this point on, the children as listeners are on edge each time the storyteller enters their room. They don't know what to expect, either from the storyteller or from themselves" (35).

The next three chapters further develop Zipes's work with fairytales: always the canonical version is followed by several subversive and/or non-European versions, teaching children to perceive both how can-

onical versions limit meaning to a particular ideological moment, and how they can transform the tales; for example, soldier tales do not always have to celebrate war or male violence; spinning tales need not always work with passive heroines waiting to be rescued. Children are encouraged to swap the tales they know, to play salad games and acrostics with fairytale motifs, to transform the tales by playing card games based on Propp's 37 narrative functions.

Having established the groundwork with fairy tales, Zipes describes in the next seven chapters how he then introduces children to the possibilities of related genres: animal tales, myths, legends, tall tales, utopian and wishing tales, science fiction, and video. The seriousness with which Zipes treats storytelling extends to his respect for children's abilities. A telling of "The Bremen Town Musicians" may be followed by a discussion about ageism or the way the animals suffer because they don't have "a union to help them when they are forced to retire" (99). Reversing morals, changing genders, whatever strategy Zipes uses, the goal is always the teaching of "responsible imagination" (186). In his final chapter, however, Zipes suddenly abandons his utopian discourse and changes his focus to suggest that our continuing attraction to fairytales relates to realities of "child abuse, neglect, and abandonment" (220) that we, like the Grimm Brothers, continue to repress. Reminding us that it was adults who always told these tales and pointing out that parental ambivalence towards children is a subject that keeps reappearing in these tales, Zipes notes that our fondness for the happy ending is itself evidence of repression. Rejecting the approach of Bruno Bettelheim and other psychologists who construct storytelling as ahistorical therapy, Zipes returns to his initial insistence that his anti-manual offers no marvellous solutions to societal problems. In this way, he refuses to give us the happy ending we have been trained to expect. Yet even here Zipes remains utopian in his conviction that we can learn to use, not abuse, fairytales. His model for the storyteller remains a fairytale hero, the little child in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes," the one who tells the truth.

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Jill P. May. *Children's Literature & Critical Theory*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. Pp. vii, 243. \$29.95, \$16.95 pb.

There seem to be many reasons to welcome Jill P. May's *Children's Literature & Critical Theory*. While May's central thesis concerning the importance of critical theory in understanding children's literature is no longer novel, her emphasis on the pedagogical effects of such critical practices does situate current trends in a new light. Yet May ultimately fails to take up the possibilities implied in her refusal to separate theory from practice, children's literature from children, classrooms from