

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

the "real" world; her argument for "new ways of approaching reading and writing" (x) too easily collapses into traditional epistemological models. Nevertheless, however limited an intervention it may be, *Children's Literature & Critical Theory*, in its attentiveness to teachers, students, and, most crucially, children does serve to confront a critical absence in contemporary studies of children's literature.

For May, critical theory is a vital pedagogical tool. Maintaining that children's literature can benefit from "Marxist, historical, archetypal, feminist, minority, rhetorical, reader response, structuralist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist" literary criticism, she argues that focusing on "children's literature as *literature*" (7) encourages both child and adult readers to participate actively in the reading, interpreting, and sharing of children's literature. While her claim that "[c]ritical readers make the best elementary school teachers, parents, citizens, and friends"(ix) is somewhat inflated, her belief in critical theory's role in meaningful reading is compelling:

Active readers realize that they must read and reread a text before it is theirs. They must hear the author out and respond to his writing before they begin to make sense of the story. They must consider whose perspective the story is told in, why it affects them as it does, if it is designed to inform and instruct or to entertain. Finally, they must determine how that story relates to their interpretation of the world they live in. (17)

All nine chapters comprising *Children's Literature & Critical Theory* are anchored in this reader-response approach suggesting (although, as it turns out, not sufficiently enacting) a critical discursive space where readers can produce and negotiate meanings different from conventional ones. In fact, the format of the book—an interweaving of the voices of May, her students, and literary critics, directed at a wide readership—accommodates May's emphasis on a reading community that fosters an active and critical engagement with children's texts.

The book's most valuable contribution is May's recovery of children (a constituency curiously but consistently ignored in children's literature criticism) as readers and critics of the books written for them. While space for children's responses are provided throughout the book, the two final chapters are devoted almost exclusively to developing a critical theory of and for children's literature that includes *children* as much as their literature. Focusing on her own experiences as a children's librarian, a parent, and an educator, May details her struggles to reconcile the adult experience of children's literature in her classrooms and research with her children's experience of the same literature at home: "When I went to library and education conferences and listened to speakers, I heard professionals tell me what 'children liked' rather than talk about the child's interpretation of her literature" (160). However, May insists that adults and children share their interpretations of children's books with each other in order to bridge

this gap for, as she emphasizes, a "good share of critical activity happens when we are sharing our literary experiences" (173).

But, in *Children's Literature & Critical Theory*, May consistently misses the opportunity to examine the radical possibilities of such multiply positioned meaning-making. Instead, she gives her analysis over to an unreflective dissemination of authoritative meanings that not only patronizes her readers, but contradicts her call for a democratization of the reading process as well. We are treated, for instance, to the following insight: "Each day [the writer] spends four to eight hours creating the characters in the world he imagines. At other times, he gets dressed, shops, cooks, eats, sleeps, chats with friends, and observes the world around him At any time, bits and pieces of his imagined world may intrude into his everyday world. At the same time, his everyday world enters his fiction" (89).

Consequently, the tentative space May opens up for potentially alternative or resistant knowledges is too quickly written over by her own "expertise." Her methodology only serves to install a limiting set of criteria that hardly leads to the expansion of "our model of children's literature and its study to include new ways of reading, discussing and interpreting if we hope to have every reader develop a critical voice" (13). Indeed, May's "new" model assumes not that there are so-called "basic patterns of literature" (10) and "traditional plot structures and archetypal patterns" (39), but that these consist of journey patterns, heroes, and satisfactory endings (41). In fact, declarations such as "[s]tories must have carefully structured plots if they are going to work" (47), "stories often are concerned with heroic journeys" (90), "the preschool child . . . is looking for a vicarious experience in his stories, and he appreciates characters who act and talk like he would" (40), "most textbooks on children's literature claim [that the German folklore tradition has] shaped what is found in today's stories for youth" (92), "[u]topian writers depend on binary structuralism" (91), and "a good author will not allow a didactic theme to dictate" (115) belie a universalizing logic that remains strangely unconnected to May's (very) occasional recognition that much children's literature reflects a white, middle-class reality.

Arguing such generalizations as matters of fact, however, results in a comfortable (and comforting) good sense about the "truths" of children's literature. May's close readings of various congenial texts work to stabilize children's literature within normalizing interpretive paradigms. For what exactly does it mean for May to read Peter's solitary quest for knowledge in Ezra Jack Keats's *The Snowy Day* as that of a "typical preschool hero" (40)? Do "children of all cultures," as she claims, "enjoy similar adventures in the snow" (55)? And, most significantly of all, what does it mean for her analysis of *The Snowy Day* to occur without any discussion of the controversy it has generated as a white-authored text about a black child? Furthermore, what does it mean,

when May applauds Barbara Cohen's *Molly's Pilgrim* for not "being too didactic," despite its focus on the "prejudice" (54) a young Jewish girl confronts? What does it mean to equate directly the oppression facing Jewish children with that faced by "[c]ontemporary children who have recently moved to the United States or whose families retain cultural traditions that are not mainstream" (54)? And what critical practice is enabled by the conflation of an artist's life and work (found in her discussions of Trina Schart Hyman, Marjorie Filley Stover, and Billi Rosen, for example), which neglects the ways in which textual representations are mediated by language and the larger social contexts of literary production? In remaining oblivious to these questions, May remains oblivious to the political implications underlying her evaluative criticism.

May's interpretive practice, fraught as it is with generalities and simplifications, becomes increasingly suffocating in her study of Native and African-American children's literature (occurring in chapters oddly entitled "Rhetorical Style" and "Poetic Language and Literary Style" respectively) where May's literary criticism continues to rely on normative Euro-American literary assumptions. After her rather thoughtless comparison of non-white peoples with "wild animals at the zoo" (in both, she observes, "[t]hough we see their exterior features and hear their ways of communication, we cannot perceive how they respond to us or how they feel when we disrupt their natural behaviours. Those people and animals who are reflected in stereotypical ways become victimized because we think we know how they exist and feel, but we fail to consult them" [67]), May goes on to examine historical distortions and contemporary, more "accurate" (73) views of the history and culture of Native Americans. May closes her discussion of Native American children's literature by explicating some Navajo poetry, but the eight poems carry a tremendous representative burden to typify the "cultural and social icons of Navajo literary patterns" (82). This same burden of representation occurs, not unsurprisingly, in May's analysis of African-American children's literature, in which *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (Patricia McKissack) and *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* (Walter Dean Myers) are treated as characteristic of a "Black Aesthetics" (140). McKissack's use of metaphorical language proves May's point that "*metaphors* are important to African-American literature" (142), while the sense of oral storytelling McKissack conveys demonstrates how "the use of conversation . . . has given African-American authors a way to directly communicate with their own people while sharing a story that can be enjoyed for its entertaining qualities by others" (143). In turn, Myer's book nicely illustrates the "autobiographical tradition of *signifying*" (143) which involves the "careful manipulation of language . . . used by black Americans when they want to 'readjust realities'" (144). This reductive interpretive policy not only forecloses the diversity of Black experiences and subjec-

tivities, but effectively neutralizes the presence of African-American children's literature.

I am not sure that it is possible for me, as a racialized female and as a critic fast becoming desperate for a trenchant theorizing of race in the field of children's literature, to recommend *Critical Theory & Children's Literature* in any straightforward fashion. Its pedagogical focus, its commitment to children as probably the "best critical interpreters of children's literature" (190), and its extensive and extremely useful bibliographical material set out directions for future study that definitely, urgently, need to be investigated. It importantly attempts to extend "scholarly" discussions beyond an academic audience. But it could have been much better.

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