"Curiouser and Curiouser!": Narration and Mimicry in Literature About Children and for Children

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Children are the natural bearers and practioners of many forms of folklore that are, regretably, lost or forgotten by all but a select few before they become adults. Among these forms of folklore are the art of unaffected storytelling or narration and naive participation in imaginative play or mimicry. Children, in general, have a propensity to recount or reenact events in which they or others have participated or to narrate, renarrate, or act out stories that they have heard, read, or had read to them. It should, then, follow that child characters in literature about children and for children share this unique ability.

In a 1988 article published in the *La Trobe Working Papers in Linguistics,* Gillian Wigglesworth states:

> The ability to relate a coherent, structured narrative demands considerable linguistic and cognitive skill. The information must be organized into a whole, participants must be named and differentiated, and linguistic referents must be established for future anaphoric reference. (167)

She continues:

> Two recent studies illustrate the way. . . different approaches can influence results. Bennett-Kastor (1983) suggested that children as young as two could introduce a noun phrase into a story and use it to maintain cohesion throughout successive clauses, while Karmiloff-Smith (1981, 1983, and 1985) claimed that it was not until around the age of seven that children were able to organize sentences into a cohesive narrative unit. To account for this difference it is necessary to examine the nature of the task required of children. In the first instance, where the children are simply asked to tell a story, they either retell a known tale or invent a story. Here, they may rely on memory of previous hearings to structure their story, or in the case of invented stories, on internal mental representations of which they, as both creator and narrator of the story, have control. In the second case, the children were being asked to tell a story from a specific set of picture prompts, demanding greater organizational skills on the part of the child who was required to set up linguistic referents from extralinguistic sources and maintain clear reference to them throughout the length of the narrative. Thus, not only is the child required to

> continually process the new information presented in each picture, but s/he must at the same time organize the information in a structured way. (168)

Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932), best known to most of us for *The Wind in the Willows,* liked to act out certain Victorian romances as a child. He, therefore, frequently depicted imaginative play-based on real life, historical data, or literary figures of several periods-in his early works about childhood. In *The Golden Age* (1895), in a chapter entitled "Sawdust and Sin," he presents a good example of the typical difficulties children encounter in narration, albeit in a book *about* childhood intended *for* adults.

Charlotte has prepared a tea party for her dolls, a form of mimicry itself, and then begins to tell them about Alice, her adventures in Wonderland, the White Rabbit, and the Queen's garden party. Her monologue is full of the false starts, stops, insertions, and corrections that can be expected in many children's narrations.

> "Now, I'm going to begin where I left off," said Charlotte, . . . "and you must pay attention, 'cos this is a treat to have a story before you're put to bed. Well, so the White Rabbit scuttled off down the passage and Alice hoped he'd come back 'cos he had a waistcoat on and her flamingo flew up a tree--but we haven't got to that part yet, you must wait a minute, and--where had I got to?"

> "Now we'll go on," began Charlotte once more. "So she got into the garden at last--I've left out a lot but you won't care, I'll tell you some other time--and they were all playing croquet, and that's where the flamingo comes in, and the Queen shouted out, 'Off with her head! '"

Her story is interrupted as one of the dolls suddenly doubles over, face down.

> '1f you'd been in the garden," went on Charlotte reproachfully "and flopped down like that when the Queen said 'Off with his head!' she'd have offed with your head; but Alice wasn't that sort of girl at all. She just said, 'I'm not afraid of you, you're nothing but a pack of cards.' --0 dear! I've got to the end already, and I hadn't begun hardly! I never can make my stories last out! Never mind, I'll tell you another one." (Grahame, *The Golden Age* 46-48)

One would think that there would be more, similar literary examples, in the context of the stories in which they appear, of children who retell or narrate stories from the literature that they have read, or have had read to them, but

such is not necessarily the case. Many who were asked for such examples mentioned only Tom Sawyer's use of information from the books that he had probably read in school in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) by Mark Twain. It should be noted, however, that Tom's apparent inability to make his "followers," including the unwitting Huck, understand portions of *The Count of Monte Cristo, Don Quixote,* tales of the Arabian Nights, and several other works of literature stems from his imperfect understanding or comprehension of the literature itself.

Narration, however, is not the only measure of a child's memory or understanding of specific stories, events, or concepts. Actions are said to speak louder than words, and a child's ability to act out stories or participate in imaginative play or mimicry also attests to a certain degree of understanding of the story, event, or concept(s) that are involved. Mimicry is, according to Caillois in *Man, Play, and Games,* one of the four divisions of play, depending on whether the role of competition (agôn), chance (alea), simulation (mimicry), or vertigo (ilinx) is dominant With mimicry, "the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone [or some thing] other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another" (19). Caillois notes that "[t]he pleasure lies in being or passing as another" (21). Let us look at some examples of mimicry from children's literature--that is, literature about as well as for children.

In her well-known *Little Women* (1868), Louisa May Alcott's (1832-1888) March sisters played Pilgrim's Progress when they were younger. In the first chapter, "Playing Pilgrims," their mother asks:

> "Do you remember how you used to play Pilgrim's Progress when you were little things? Nothing delighted you more than to have me tie my piece bags on your backs for burdens, give you hats and sticks and rolls of paper, and let you travel through the house from the cellar, which was the City of Destruction, up, up, to the housetop, where you had all the lovely things you could collect to make a Celestial City." (13)

One of the earliest and most inventive examples of a form of mimicry is found in "The Town in the Library" (ca. 1899), written by the well-known children's author E[dith] Nesbit [Bland] (1858-1924). Rosamund and Fabian the third and fourth of the five Bland children in real life--are left to their own devices in the family library for a few hours on the day before Christmas. Their mother suggests that they play with their bricks or make pictures with their picture blocks, but she also admonishes them not to "touch the two top-drawers of the bureau" (134). Naturally, the two children immediately try to find a means to open the forbidden drawers without *touching*

them. Accomplishing this with the aid of the fireplace poker and tongs, even though "The front of the bureau got a little scratched" (Nesbit 136), they discover, but later wish they bad not, that the drawers contain their Christmas presents-lead soldiers, a doll and wicker work cradle, a donkey on a wheeled platform, some brass cannons, a bag of marbles, some flags, and a mouse that seemed to move by clockwork. After replacing these items carefully and closing the drawers to the bureau, the two children decide to build themselves a castle.

> Then they began to build. They had . . . two boxes of bricks--the wooden bricks with the pillars and the coloured glass windows, and the rational bricks which are made of clay like tiles. When all the bricks were used up they got the pretty picture blocks that kind Uncle Thomas gave them, and they built with these; but one box of blocks does not go far.
>
> …
>
> But the best of a library is the books. Rosamund and Fabian made up with books. They got Shakespeare in fourteen volumes, and Rollin's *Ancient History* and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall,*and *The Beauties of Literature* in fifty-six fat little volumes, and they built not only a castle, but a town--and a big town--that presently towered high above them on the top of the bureau.
>
> …
>
> "It's almost big enough to get into," said Fabian, "if we had some steps." So they made steps with the *British Essayists,* the *Spectator* and the *Rambler,* and the *Observer,* and the *Tatler;* and when the steps were done they walked up them.
>
> …
>
> Rosamund and Fabian simply walked up the steps into the town they had built. (139-40)

While they are in their town, the company of blue soldiers from the bureau drawer comes to life and lays siege to the town. The children are only able to appease them with the raisins, figs, and candied fruit that they find in the second drawer of the bureau. To save themselves, they ultimately must set the company of red soldiers, the donkey, and the wind-up mouse against the blue soldiers and flee from their carefully constructed city. This idea of entering a city or town of one's own making persisted and ultimately formed the basis for Mrs. Bland's *The Magic City* (1910) nearly a dozen years later.

In compiling a list of further examples of this sort of mimicry, it is curious to see that these and additional examples from immediate recollection were

found in books that were written during or about the Victorian era, either in England or America, or by authors who had been children at that time. Ira Bruce Nadel states in "'The Mansion of Bliss' or the Place of Play in Victorian Life and Literature," *Children's Literature* (1982), that "The Victorian novel is a remarkable register of the kinds of play permitted in Victorian homes, as well as of the significance and influence of play on the moral and social life of the time" (24). The same is equally true of Victorian children's literature--literature that has been written for children by authors who were children during that era, or the works of modern authors who have researched this period carefully and have consciously placed their stories in Victorian times.

During the Victorian and Edwardian eras, adult attitudes toward play and the leisure pursuits of children changed significantly. Unproductive play and idle amusements were considered to be frivolous; but structured, often competitive, play and games were recognized and sanctioned for their intellectual, educational, and even physical benefits to the child. Nadel's article and similar social histories provide interesting, rather accurate views of the evolution of play and children's pursuits during this epoch.

In an attempt to justify its existence, much of what had been random play became organized, competitive games and sports. Idle diversions, such as shooting marbles or skipping rope, took on sets of rules and specific names so that marble shooting or rope skipping became a means to an end.

The Victorian concern for competition and rules was matched by an equally forceful belief in the benefits of using one's imagination and expressing one's creativity. Imaginative play took several forms, including reenactments of incidents from literature, history, or everyday life. This form of play could be accomplished alone or with others and without "props" or with dolls, realistic miniature figures and settings, or anyone of a number of theatrical toys.

A considerable amount of play, it seems, had to be as realistic and as detailed as possible. The Victorian doll house is an example of this general tendency, as are miniature replicas of people--particularly dolls and toy soldiers--places, and things, and mechanical and wind-up toys.

There are numerous examples of these realistic, detailed miniatures in children's books of the Victorian era. Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) set her delightful story *The Tale o/Two Bad Mice* (1904) in one of these doll houses; Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) played with his leaden soldiers on his counterpane ("The Land of Counterpane" 18) and buried one in the lawn of his grandfather Balfour's garden ("The Dumb Soldier" 87); and Margery Williams [Bianco] (1881-1944) "peopled" her nursery in *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922) with, among other things, a clockwork mouse, a jointed, wooden lion, and various mechanical toys.

> The mechanical toys were very superior, and looked down upon every one else; they were full of modem ideas and pretended they were real. (Williams 15)

With the time and effort that went into making these toys seem as realistic as possible, who could blame *them* if they thought they were real? *The Velveteen Rabbit* also provides yet another example of a child's participation in mimicry.

> Near the house where they lived there was a wood, and in the long June evenings the Boy liked to go there after tea to play. He took the Velveteen Rabbit with him, and before he wandered off to pick flowers, or play at brigands among the trees, he always made the Rabbit a little nest somewhere among the bracken, where he would be quite cosy, for he was a kindhearted little boy and he liked Bunny to be comfortable. (25)

In an early chapter of Kenneth Grahame's *The Golden Age*, entitled "A Holiday," Grahame's brother Harold amuses himself in solitary, imaginary play as a muffin man.

> It was a strange craze, certainly, but Harold, who invented his own games and played them without assistance, always stuck staunchly to a new fad, till he had worn it quite out. Just at present he was a muffin-man, and day and night he went through passages and up and down staircases, ringing a noiseless bell and offering phantom muffins to invisible wayfarers. (15)

While Harold played out his role as a muffin man, their brother Edward had taken on the persona of a bear.

> "And Edward, where is he?" I questioned again.
>
> "He'll be coming along the road," said Charlotte. "He'll be crouching in the ditch when we get there, and he's going to be a grizzly bear and spring out on us, only you mustn't say I told you so, 'cos it's to be a surprise."
>
> "All right," I said magnanimously. "Come on and let's be surprised." But I could not help feeling that on this day of days even a grizzly felt misplaced and common.
>
> Sure enough an undeniable bear sprang out on us as we dropped into the road; then ensued shrieks, growlings, revolver-shots, and unrecorded heroisms, till Edward condescended at last to roll over and die, bulking large and grim, an unmitigated grizzly. It was an

> understood thing, that whoever took upon himself to be a bear must eventually die, sooner or later, even if he were the eldest born; else, life would have been all strife and carnage, and the Age of Acorns have displaced our hard-won civilization. This little affair concluded with satisfaction to all parties concerned, we rambled along the road, picking up the defaulting Harold by the way, muffinless now and in his right and social mind. (15-16)

In a later chapter, "Alarums and Excursions," Harold suggests that the others join him at playing Cavaliers and Roundbeads, probably familiar to them from a history lesson. This idea is soundly rejected, so he proposes that they play at being Knights of the Round Table. After a predictable argument over who will take the various roles, the description of their group effort would have made Malory proud.

In *The Wind in the Willows,* it is the field mice, the "children" of the story, if you will, who are involved in playacting. It is Christmas Eve, and following an evening of caroling, they arrive at Mole End last of all as is their custom. After they sing a carol and have been invited in for refreshments as usual, Mole says to Rat. in the way of further introduction,

> They play act too, these follows. . . . Make them up all by themselves, and act them afterward. And very well they do it too! They gave us a capital one last year, about a field-mouse who was captured at sea by a Barbary corsair, and made to row in a galley; and when he escaped and got home again, his lady-love had gone into a convent.(94)

Most people have thought that A. A. Milne (1882-1956) wrote "about his son, Christopher Robin, who was six when *Winnie-the-Pooh* appeared in 1926, and about his son's toys," but it now appears that he "drew on the adventures [that] he and his brother Ken shared" when they were children (Lurie 11). They were obviously quite interested in, and Milne, no doubt, remembered many facts about, the several Arctic expeditions that occurred during their childhood, particularly those of Peary in 1891-92 and 1893-95.

In *Winnie-the-Pooh,* Milne depicts either his and his brother's or his son's comments and imaginative play, based on a child's understanding, or misunderstanding, of these events in a chapter entitled "Expotition to the North Pole." He accurately portrays the childlike confusion concerning the pronunciation and the meaning of an unfamiliar word in an exchange between Christopher Robin and Pooh.

> "We are all going on a Expedition," said Christopher Robin, as soon as he got up and brushed himself. "Thank you Pooh."
> "Going on an Expotition?" said Pooh eagerly. '1 don't think I've

> ever been on one of those. Where are we going on this Expotition?"
> "Expedition, silly old Bear. It's got an 'x' in it."
> "Oh!" said Pooh. "I know." But he didn't really.
> "What *is* the North Pole?" [Pooh] asked.
> "It's just a thing you discover," said Christopher Robin carelessly, not being quite sure himself.
> "Oh! I see," said Pooh. "Are bears any good at discovering it?"
> "Of course they are. And Rabbit and Kanga and all of you. It's an Expedition. That's what an Expedition means. A long line of everybody." (112-13)

Later, when Pooh picks up a long stick to assist in the rescue of Baby Roo who has been swept away by the stream in which he was washing himself, Christopher Robin asks,

> "Pooh," he said, "where did you find that pole?"
> Pooh looked at the pole in his hands.
> "I just found it," he said. "I thought it ought to be useful. I just picked it up."
> "Pooh," said Christopher Robin solemnly, "the Expedition is over. You have found the North Pole!" (125-27)

With *Swallows and Amazons* (1930), Arthur Ransome (1884-1967), at forty-six, already the author of more than twenty books, created what is considered a "new age" in children's literature. He too, however, was familiar with the imaginative play of his childhood as well as that of the children whom he knew and about whom he wrote. The very first page ably underscores the tendency of the child to persist in his imaginary world, even when conventional behavior would be more practical.

> Roger, aged seven and no longer the youngest of the family, ran in wide zigzags, to and fro, across the steep field that sloped up from the lake to Holly Howe, the farm where they were staying for part of the summer holidays. He ran until he nearly reached the hedge by the foot path, then turned and ran until he nearly reached the hedge on the other side of the field. Then he turned and crossed the field again. Each crossing of the field brought him nearer to the farm. The wind was against him, and he was tacking up against it to the farm, where at the gate his patient mother was awaiting him. He could not run straight against the wind because he was a sailing vessel, a tea-clipper, the *Cutty Sark.* His elder brother John had said only that morning that steamships were just engines in tin boxes. Sail was the thing, and so, though it took rather longer, Roger made his way up in the field in broad tacks.

> When he came near his mother, he saw that she had in her hand a red envelope and a small piece of white paper, a telegram. He knew at once what it was. For a moment he was tempted to run straight to her. He knew that telegrams came only from his father, and this one must be the answer. . .. But sail was the thing, not steam, so he tacked on, heading, perhaps, a little closer to the wind. At last he headed straight into the wind, moved slower and slower, came to a stop at his mother's side, began to move backwards, and presently brought up with a little jerk, anchored, and [was] in harbour.
>
> "Is it the answer?" he panted, out of breath after all that beating up against the wind. "Does he say Yes?" (13-14)

In looking at the examples that have been presented, focusing on the Victorian child, one might ask if the same sort of presentation might be made for more modem children. To date, however, few come to mind. The explanation for this might be a result of the experiences of current children compared to those of the Victorians.

We tend to think of Victorians as straight-laced and strict, and their children were to be seen and not heard in adult company. Attitudes toward childhood, however, were in a period of transition as a result of the concept of the kindergarten. Developed in Germany by Frederick Froeber and established in England in the mid-1850's by Johannes and Berthe Ronges-neighbors of Charles Dickens, whose fictional children could have benefited from such an environment-the kindergarten originally consisted of two rooms: one for games and the other, adjoining a garden or other outdoor play area, for exercise. The Victorian child's day was regimented, and there were specific times for structured play, education, and educational play, but there were also times for explorative walks and unstructured play, inside and outdoors in the fresh air. Imaginative play, both indoors and out, was strongly encouraged.

Today, the emphasis appears to have shifted again. Modem children are supposedly brought up in a considerably more permissive atmosphere but are, paradoxically, subject to more structure than one might recognize at first glance. Both lessons and play are *quite* structured. At school most children are expected to progress, but only with their classmates, neither excelling nor falling behind by much. Worksheets and work- and coloring books, the mainstay of modern classwork and homework, tend to stifle both imagination and creativity. Even recess is organized, structured, and competitive, and sports, predominantly team sports, and pastimes are highly organized. Schools allow less and less free time for solitary or individual exploration, and "free" time at home is consumed by watching television, participating in Nintendo-type games, and playing with mass produced toys.

There is hope, however, that the pendulum is beginning to swing the opposite direction, in an ever-increasing wave of nostalgia for "lost childhood." This is evident in a number of books that depict children from an earlier era as they participate in play of their own design or show children involved in imaginative play.

Alice McLerran (1933-) paid homage to an imaginary town that had been created by her mother and her mother's childhood playmates. She "reconstructed" it in a picture book, *Roxaboxen* (1991), with the aid of a manuscript her mother wrote in childhood, memories of relatives, and letters and maps from the town's former "citizens." "On a hill on the southeast comer of Second Avenue and Eighth Street, in Yuma, Arizona, there is a place once known as Roxaboxen" (endnotes).

> Marian called it Roxaboxen.
> (She always knew the name of everything.)
> There across the road, it looked like any rocky hill--
> nothing but sand and rocks, and some old wooden boxes,
> cactus and greasewood and thorny ocotillo--
> but it was a special place.
>
> …
>
> A town of Roxaboxen began to grow, traced in lines of stone:
> Main Street first, edged with the whitest ones,
> and then the houses.
> Charles made his of the biggest stones.
> After all, he was the oldest.
> At first the houses were very plain, but soon they all began to
> add more rooms.
> The old wooden boxes could be shelves or tables or anything
> you wanted.
> You could find pieces of pottery for dishes. Round pieces
> were best.
>
> …
>
> After a while they added other streets.
> Frances moved to one of them and built herself a new
> house
> outlined in desert glass,
> bits of amber, amethyst, and sea-green:
> a house of jewels.
>
> …
>
> More than fifty years later, Frances went back and Roxaboxen
> was still there.
> She could see the white stones bordering Main Street, and there
> where she had built her house the desert glass still glowed--
> amethyst, amber, and sea-green. (McLerran n.p.)

The illustrator for this marvelous book, Caldecott medalist Barbara Cooney, found recreating this world to be one of her most difficult assignments. She
actually traveled to Yuma where she found "a small tan hill dotted with stones and rocks, and scattering of desert plants, and not lots of broken glass and an old car chassis." Later, "accompanied by Alice McLerran's eighty-year-old Aunt Frances, [a] former Roxaboxenite, the magic and spirit of Roxaboxen began to emerge-a magic found in the minds and hearts of the children who played there" (McLerran endnotes).

In *The Indian in the Cupboard* (1980) by Lynne Reid Banks (1929-), two boys play with miniature figures of both humans and animals. Here the play is directed more by what the boys have learned from their history lessons than from literature, and, ironically, only the mass-produced, molded plastic figures come to life after they are placed in a castoff, metal, bathroom cabinet.

The preceding is obviously a report of work in progress. There is a growing body of work being published by both linguists and those involved in various forms of literary criticism that focuses on storytelling or narratives produced by children in all types of literature. These do not, however, seek out examples of children retelling or referring to a story that exists as a work of literature itself. More examples of this sort of narration, as well as descriptions of similar mimicry, need to be sought in literature both for adults and about and for children. Then one needs to look at them carefully for patterns in their use and the structure of the narratives and the examples of mimicry.

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