How children's books can help parents understand their children

Come la letteratura per l'infanzia può supportare i genitori nel comprendere i propri figli

Meni Kanatsouli
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
menoula@nured.auth.gr

ABSTRACT
Children between the ages of four and six are overcome by strong emotions which can stem from feelings of insecurity, fear and inadequacy as they struggle to understand and become a part of the world that surrounds them. Children's stories can be a valuable tool in helping parents and guardians understand and decode children's behavior. Because children can not yet verbally express themselves adults must be able to decode their ways of communicating. Children's books with children as protagonists can offer valuable insight to the inner world of children as well as entertainment to both children and adults alike. These stories are intergenerational. They not only help small listeners discover role models but also provide literary enjoyment to adults.

I bambini di età compresa tra quattro e sei anni sono scossi da forti emozioni che possono derivare da sentimenti di insicurezza, paura e inadeguatezza in una lotta per capire ed entrare a far parte del mondo che li circonda. La lettratura per l'infanzia può essere un valido strumento per aiutare i genitori e in generale gli adulti a capire e decodificare il comportamento dei bambini. Poiché i bambini di queste età si esprimono diversamente dagli adulti, questi devono essere in grado di decodificare i loro modi di comunicare. La letteratura per l'infanzia, con i bambini come protagonisti, sono in grado di offrire informazioni preziose sul mondo interiore dei bambini, nonché essere un grande intrattenimento per bambini adulti. In questo modo, possiamo considerare queste storie come intergenerazionali: non solo aiutano i piccoli ascoltatori a scoprire se stessi, ma risultano inoltre una valida forma di godimento letterario per gli adulti.

KEYWORDS
Crossover literature, children's literature, power and control over children, parental role models, subjectivity.
Incrocio narrativo, letteratura per l'infanzia, potere e controllo dei figli, modelli di genitorialità, soggettività.

Formazione & Insegnamento XII – 2 – 2014
ISSN 1973-4778 print – 2279-7505 on line
doi: 107346/-fei-XII-02-14_09 © Pensa MultiMedia

Introduction

The phenomenon of adults and children reading the same texts is by no means a new one. Before children's literature was established as a distinct genre, there were many books whose stories were gripping enough to be enjoyed by children as well by their parents.

1. Children's Literature: A crossover literature

As Pat Pinsent points out, "the phenomenon of readers who defy boundaries is common for books which, while ostensibly addressing children, have attracted adults whose nostalgic memories of childhood classics are blended with an increased awareness of their hidden depths" (Pinsent, 2004, p. 3). The argument that children's books can offer adult readers a kind of escape from their own grim reality into an idyllic world of innocence is definitely a good one. Jacqueline Rose (1984) supports the view that children's literature was invented by adults for adults so that through children's texts they may cling onto a sense of long –lost- innocence –which of course is an illusion- which they believe is the hallmark of childhood.

Another factor leading to books crossing age boundaries is the role of parents as the first mediators to their children of fairy tales and other stories. However, this adult mediator role does not seem to belong to the phenomenon of crossover literature which by definition is "a literature which addresses a diverse, cross-generational audience that can include readers of all ages" (Beckett, 2009, p. 3). It would appear that the boundary between what an adult reads to his children and what he chooses to read for himself are two different things. As true as this may be, the fact still remains that it is far from clear whether adults as mediators read solely for the sake of the child or whether they also read for their own purposes and pleasure as well.

I will address the role of the adult who reads stories to children or for children for the double purpose, whether intentional or unintentional, of better understanding them and so being in a better position to offer them their help and guidance. It should be remembered that categorizing readers based on the age factor is a very recent practice which mainly serves commercial necessities (Beckett, 2009, p. 11). For years and years folk tales were narrated in public to the entire local community regardless of age differences. Both young and old listened to these tales together. Even when the scenes got scary, the children were present. By listening to these tales, children were very early on familiarized with the difficulties and obstacles of real life which were rendered symbolically through the art of storytelling.

I shall use this past tradition of adults, and in particular parents, who read the same stories as their children but, of course, I shall place it within a modern framework. The adult who reads these stories aims to decode the fictional child's way of thinking so as to better understand, help, support and offer relief to his own child. This, however, is not the only advantage. Through reading texts for children, he inevitably learns a lot about himself as well. He may, in a sense, remember his own reading experiences as a child which offers him the opportunity to ponder on his very own inner self. Francis Spufford says it well: "The words we take into ourselves help to shape us. They help form the questions we think are worth asking; they shift around the boundaries of the sayable inside us, and

the related borders of what is acceptable; their potent images […] dart new bridges into being between our conscious and unconscious minds (Spufford, 2002, p. 21-22).

2. Methodological issues

As can be concluded from my introduction, my scientific method will be to approach literary characters, both adults and children alike, with the help of the discipline of psychology, at times using psychoanalytic theories and combining them with Sandra Beckett's (1999, 2009) views of crossover fiction or kidult fiction as it is sometimes called (Gonzalez Cascallana, 2004, p. 165). "Crossover fiction" means the reading of texts based on the double audience they address. To this psycho-centric approach, I will also incorporate the very interesting sociological point of view of Joseph Zornado on the ways modern adult culture shapes the development and personality of children.

I shall begin with Joseph Zornado. Although I do not agree with his theory in its entirety, I will make use of it mainly as a tool that will allow me to adopt a critical stance of the ways that the subconscious intentions of adults who, through literary narration, attempt to communicate with children and get into their minds and the way they work. Parents' intentions, on a subconscious level, despite their indisputable love for their children are not always a priori well-meaning and positive. In Zornado's opinion, adults are indoctrinated into the mainstream ideology as a result of their own educational background and cultural accruement. As a result, they tend to reproduce and impose their own dominant and often times oppressing ways of thinking onto their children. The same happens in their literary narrations for children.

Here is a characteristic example of Zornado's position: the infant comes into the world and is almost always greeted by an institutional hierarchy that immediately represents to the infant the nature of the lived relationship as an event of power and control […] Children's literature is a part of a montage of adult cultural practices that, along with child rearing pedagogies, speaks to the cultural context that gives to adult authors and children's texts and so to a reproduction of unconscious relational practices bent on exercising and justifying adult power over the child (Zornado, 2001, p. XVI-XVIII).

The books I shall discuss address the ages between five and eight. I believe that in this phase of a child's development, adult control over children is inevitable seeing as children are not yet capable of protecting and guarding themselves. This makes exercising some measure of control over them more readily acceptable. Perhaps the key question that remains to be answered is the level of control that should be used. But allow me start with a few indicative examples.

3. Children's fears and children's literature

Oscar (*Oscar y El Leon de Correos – Oscar and the Post Office Lion*) is a boy who is very afraid. In his overactive imagination the iron lion at his neighborhood s post office building takes on real life dimensions. Every time his mother sends him to the post office to mail a letter by putting it in the lion's huge and permanently open mouth, Oscar comes face to face with his fears. He is scared to death that the lion with his wide open mouth will devour him all in one single gulp. The

same happens at night when he can't sleep out of fear of the boogey man lion.

Here are some excerpts:

> He needed to have three lights on: the overhanging light fixture, his bedside lamp and the corridor light as well.
> […]
> Would he drag him by his feet? Pull out his hair? Or would he do something so terrible that he could hardly imagine it? Oscar didn't dare scream out of fear that his voice would not come out or that the boogey man would pounce on him. Whenever he felt him close he would remain totally still and shut his eyes with all his might. He could hear the boogey man's footsteps and feel his breath. His fear wouldn't allow him to open his eyes and face him.

The underlying fears that torment the boy lose their power when they are rationalized. In this particular story, adult intervention and how it is done is crucial. It is the post office manager himself who intervenes and comes to Oscar's aid. He explains to the boy how the lion's mechanism works and in so doing helps the boy see how groundless his fears are. Also, his father – in the delightful ending of the story – will confess that he, too, had the same fears for the very same lion when he was little boy.

It is natural that children who live in their own fantasy worlds should give flesh and blood to the personal ghosts that disturb, haunt and frighten them. Jackie Stallcup points out: "many modern picture books seek to reassure children that they have nothing to fear from imaginary dangers while at the same time demonstrating that there are very real dangers that only adults can defuse" (Stallcup, 2002, p. 126).

Psychologists keep on reminding us that all adults including parents should not try to inflict their sterile perfectionism on children. Trying to forcefully chase away a child's fear is not always the recommended thing to do and rarely does it ever work. There are other methods, smarter ones, such as what Oscar s father did when he spoke to Oscar about his own childhood fears. Or like the post office manager himself when he provided a logical explanation to Oscar of how the lion machine worked. It is important for children and the adults who nurture them to understand that fears, to a certain extent, are natural and that people of all ages have them (Rogge, 2006, p. 65). When adults use that kind of honest approach, children feel that they are being sincerely supported and understood, that the adults around them really do comprehend the emotional difficulties they face when it comes to working out and overcoming their fears.

4. Loss in Children's Literature. Transitional objects

In another book, *The Snowman Took Mom Away* by Voula Mastori, certain habits that many young children have cause adult concern. It could be the loss of a very dear person belonging to a child's immediate environment, for example a mother, or perhaps the child feels deprived of love and attention by the adults in his/her life. Very often this will lead the child to seek for a substitute figure in order to fill the void that has been created. Pacifier, thumb sucking, teddy bears, security blankets or any kind of comfort toy provide the child with the sense of touch that is so vital to if he/she is to overcome the loss or sense of deprivation (Rogge, 2006: 74-77). Let's look at an example of when children first attend kinder-

garten. In the beginning, they usually suffer fear and anguish when the time comes to let go of their caretaker s hand:

> It was cold that day. No matter how tightly I squeezed into my coat my shaking wouldn t stop. Even mom s hand was cold. Still, this didn t stop her from taking me to that nursery school. So here I am. With all the other children scattered about and me clutching my mother s hand and her handbag … just for good measure (*The Snowman Took Mom Away*, 24-25).

The tragedy of loss is enacted by many of the characters and in many acts in this multicultural school. It is there, at the school, that the children feel the first pangs of loss. The teachers understand the little dramas in the hearts of the children and so let them cry for as long as they need to. In time, each child reveals his or her own way of dealing with his or her fears and insecurities, for example, when Sou turns to his towel:

> He was yellow with black, narrow eyes and a huge towel […] he wouldn t go anywhere without his towel. Even when he went to the bathroom, he would take his towel with him even though it was troublesome. See, if it went to school surely they would put it in a higher grade than Sou (37).

The towel gives Sou what he needs at that particular point of his life, a familiar reference to hold onto. It is a substitute just like a pacifier or a teddy bear. It helps him cope with the loss of his loved ones in a new environment, very different from his family environment.

These "transitional objects" as they are called act as a symbolic connection to the need for a maternal presence. They have the magical power to offer love and in so doing may bridge the void that is created by the temporary or permanent absence of a mother. The mother as an external object becomes one and the same as the internal mother presence in the child. The object acts as a buffer to the child's loneliness. It is a constant reminder to the child that he/she is not alone. Stuffed animals for example spark the memory of the warmth and softness of a mother's body (Kashdan, 1999, p. 124-127), their importance is so great that some researchers believe they make up the core of adult life (Kidd, 2011, p. 50). If seen in this perspective, as a means to balance internal voids, as antidotes to the pain of loss, then, parents can understand why children use them for extended periods of time.

5. Ego and alter-ego in children's books

Children who feel unloved or are in fact unloved by the people who most closely surround them often display disturbed behavior. In the following story the main character of the story creates an alter-ego, someone his own age, who is to him real and visible when, of course, others can't see him. In *My friend Jimmy* by Elena Artzanidou, Dimitri blames his imaginary friend, Jimmy, for all his mischief which, of course, is clearly not true as he (Dimitri) is the only real child in the book:

> In the end, I paid dearly for your huge appetite. Mom knew that we had eaten all her cookies, the orange ones that we liked so much. If you could

> have heard her shouts, never mind the punishment she allotted, you wouldn't be standing there so calm and cool. Say something, don't just stand there! Aren't you going to ask me what the punishment was? (p. 14)
> […]
> Whenever we are up to no good, afterwards, no matter what I say, you never say a word. But whenever you want to cook up trouble, you never shut up until you drag me into it, too (18).

Dimitri's imaginary friend is a reflection of what is going on in Dimitri's mind. He also very conveniently acts as a scapegoat, a way to defend himself whenever he misbehaves and adults want to punish him. Or, it could be that his little mind is simply unable to separate what is real from what is imaginary.

The story's intention is educational, not only because it emphasizes the type of punishment that Dimitri's actions bring about but mainly because it stresses the importance of the literary child's socialization, and through him, of course, the child reader's as well. Dimitri often automatically calls on his imaginary friend like when he is given his milk to drink: "But Jimmy has to drink his milk, too!" he says to his mother who plays right along saying: "Oh, yes, of course, I'll put him some milk, too." In the house, maybe he can get away with it but it isn't so easy to do outside the house. Other people think Dimitri is a weirdo, for example, his teacher who comments: "Again he is talking to himself!" And his classmates call him "loony."

It is only when he leaves the comfort and safety of his inner world and becomes friend with a real live boy, a classmate of him, that the need for an imaginary friend is eliminated. All types of neuroses come about when basic needs on an organized hierarchy are not met (Bosmajian, 2009, p. 191). The insecurity that a lonely child or an only child may feel often leads him to behave in ways that seem strange to others. So, an adult can help a child who has concocted an imaginary friend by introducing real live playmates into the child's life. By communicating with real flesh and blood playmates, the child can let go of his fantasy world and enter the real world.

6. Protective parents

Parental role models, that is to say, behaviors that parents develop to protect and better deal with their children present a wide variety in children's literature. After a surging wave of books with a rather liberal penchant that advocated non-domineering tactics, more and more books are now stressing the importance of parents adopting stricter, more traditional roles in the upbringing of their children. Equally important is the need to intervene more often in their children's lives. This seems to be especially true in the portrayal of the father figure in books. In place of the rather "feminist" daddies that were once so popular, we now see fathers who without losing an iota of their gentleness and keen interest in their children's upbringing are also coming across as dynamic and self-sufficient role models.

This is what the little literary boy in Svein Nyhus's *Daddy* believes. Little Tommy, right from the start of the book, wonders where his daddy is. He wants to see him very much and he remembers (or thinks that he remembers) how his father would "assemble his toys without even reading the directions" and other such accomplishments like "Dad can open a lock without a key." The book's illustration of the father is super-sized most likely to emphasize the unfailing admiration that little Tommy has for him.

Agnes Margrethe Bjorvand rightly observes that Tommy's happy relationship with his father is somewhat ambiguous. It could be that Tommy dreams of having such a wonderfully close relationship with his father or it could be wishful thinking on his part (Bjorvand, 2010, p. 230). The book's literary reality reinforces the uncertainty. Tommy's father is often away on business. So, it could be that Tommy's fixation with his father – there is no mention of a mother – is due to the fact that he very rarely sees him and so misses him to the point that he idolizes their relationship.

What is most importantly accentuated in the book is the boy's need for a strong father figure, one with typical masculine traits. Fine and well, we may think, but surely what is even more important is the child's need to feel loved and protected. However true this is, the need for a father figure seems to outweigh all other needs. In fact the book promotes the typical macho stereotype father image and encourages real fathers to respond to this stereotype.

Regardless of the degree of tolerance displayed by parents, the book expounds on the need to provide a secure, stable and trusting environment for their children. This is the message Isidoro's parents try to get across to him when they see him sad about not being able to go on summer holidays due to the financial crisis. Quite imaginatively they make up a fictional character, someone who has been shipwrecked and who sends Isidoro letters telling him how to transform his house into a holiday place:

> I have a marvelous idea! It just came to me. The word house (which you say is the most boring place in the world) begins with an H just like Hios, Halki and Hawaii. So, what about transforming your house into an island? Think of it! And if you want I can give you some terrific ideas (*Holidays at home with Isidoro*, 25).

Of course in real life real parents do not have the time or energy to act so inventively and imaginatively to their children's needs. Often, they are totally unprepared for such a responsibility. As true as this may be, they can pick up ideas and find inspiration in the smart plots of children's books and in so doing face up to their own difficulties in dealing with situations and the profound needs of their children.

The little girl in *I Like to Sream* discovers very early on that by screaming and shouting she can get what she wants. She tries it out a first time and when she sees that it works like magic she permanently adopts this method to have all her wishes fulfilled:

- My voice is magic! They give me anything I want just so I won't bother them and to just make me stop shrieking and scaring them. When it's cold outside and I first ask gently and politely my mother for ice cream:
- Mom, I want an ice-cream cone.
  Mom tries in her own way and says: –You'll get sick. Think about for a minute.
- But I want ice-cream, I go on to say.
  Mom again insists and says no.
- I want ice-cream, I insist.
  Mom still says no. Then I open up my big mouth and start screaming.
- I said I WANT ICE-CREAM!
  And Mom gives it to me.

The book vividly portrays how the little girl uses all kinds of tricks to get her way. She has her mother twisted around her little finger. By threatening to

scream at the top of her lungs she controls the adults in her life. But as soon as she goes to kindergarten she enters a totally new environment and another phase in her life. Her wants constantly clash with the wants of the other children. It soon becomes evident that the only way to survive is through everyone making mutual concessions. The well- trained teacher of course knows this and shows –to the readers- proper ways that an adult should deal with children: namely that an adult should keep a balance and not give into the inflated ego of a child. That he/she should teach the child the meaning of boundaries, the limits they are allowed to go to. And so, our little heroine is forced to accept the boundaries set down for her. She learns that there are lines that simply can not be crossed. In other words she is taught to respect other people's space.

– Can I watch TV, mom?
– No, she says. And even when I hear this word that I can't stand, I don't scream like I used to.

7. Multiple points of view in children's books

In the existing plethora of books which deal with the way parents deal with their children there are innumerable variations. As adults what we tend to notice first is the various types of pedagogical perceptions – ranging from liberal to conservative, from democratic to authoritative– that characterize the child/adult relationship. What usually evades adult readers, however, is that either way what is projected at all times is the will and desires of adults onto their children. The shaping of children's characters and how they will turn out to be as adults is determined by adults, first and foremost the parents, who impose their standards on them through controlling behaviors. When this control is exercised gently but firmly and not in an oppressive, domineering way, it is better accepted by the child but also plays a more determinative role in the child's development.

As much as these books, like the examples I have cited, allow plenty of margin for the adult to peruse, accept or reject this or the other pedagogical perception, like Jornado says, they do not offer much guidance in helping him/her realize the extent of his power over the child. They muddle reality and prevent him/her from questioning his own intentions and the mainstream culture as well.

Books that do not take a supporting stand, however indirectly, for this or the other pedagogical scheme but instead lead adults to perceive that the adult/child relationship is primarily structured on the basis of adult control and authority are books that through characterization introduce a variety of subjective viewpoints. This can happen within children's books. For example, in Alvin Granowsky's book, the famous story of Jack and the beanstalk is presented from two points of view, that of Jack's and that of the giant's. The first version is the classical story of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, known to all of us. In the second version, the giant's wife tells the story of how Jack stole the money, the harp and the goose that laid golden eggs from her good-hearted dead husband (*Giants Have Feelings, too. Another Point of View*). The story is reversed and the giant is a good man who falls victim to Jack's cunning exploitation of him.

In Anthony Browne's illustrated book *Voices in the Park* there are four different points of view of the same events that take place in a park. Each character narrates his own version of the events. There is a bossy mother, her son whom she oppresses, a disappointed father and his very active daughter. The four points of view are marked by a change in typeface (Schwenke Wyile, 2006, p. 187).

The book illustrates to the adult reader that all points of view, no matter how subjective, are equal and that all could be a likely account of the events in the park. None are subject to criticism. The adult reader comes face to face with his/her own self and has the opportunity to self observe and ruminate on the power privileges that mainstream ideology can exercise on children. These kinds of books can make the adult reader re-evaluate his subconscious beliefs and even go so far as to demolish them.

In *Zoom* by Istvan Banyai**,** the reader sees how modern books for children reassess or demolish popular perceptions on what children should be allowed to read depending on their age. In many ways, it is also a philosophical book as it illustrates the relativity between shifting points of view. In this wordless picture book, the faceless observer, every two pages, zooms in an out of what he has seen in the previous two pages and from his new position sees much more. He/she is therefore forced to broaden his understanding and to admit that the way we perceive of things is relative and dependent on circumstances. Therefore, he comes to realize that he has to be very careful when standing up for his views especially when he tries to impose them onto young children.

Epilogue

The adult who reads literature with his child or for his child can absolutely find ideas on how to deal with the childhood phase of his children. But he can also find his own thought processes, his own ideas which he can re-evaluate and in so doing come to a better understanding of his own intentions and courses of action. It is many ways not unlike an epiphany. He/she comes to realize that texts for children have a sub text or "shadow text" which addresses him or her only. "The simplicity of texts of children's literature is only half the truth about them. They also possess a shadow, an unconscious – a more complex and more complete understanding of the world and people that remains unspoken beyond the simple surface but provides that simple surface with its comprehensibility. The simple surface sublimates – hides, but still manages to imply the presence of – something less simple" (Nodelman, 2008, p. 206).

References

Primary sources

Artzanidou, E. (2010). *O filos mou o Jimmy/My friend Jimmy*. Athens: Psychogios.

Banyai, I. (1998). *Zoom*. Puffin/Penguin.

Browne, A. (1999). *Voices in the Park*. London: Picture Corgi Books.

Granowsky, A. (1996). Illustrated by L. Graves and H. Buerchkholtz. *Jack and the Beanstalk. Another Point of View* (*Giants have Feelings, too. Another Point of View*). Steck-Vaughn.

Mastori, V. (1999). *O Hionanthropos pire te mama / The Snowman Took Mom Away.* Athens: Patakis.

Michalopoulou, A. (2010). *Diakopes sto spiti me ton Isidoro/ Holidays at home with Isidoro*. Athens: Patakis.

Munoz Puelles, V. (1998). *Oscar y El Leon de Correos / Oscar and the Post Office Lion*. Madrid: Anaya.

Nyhus, S. (2002). *Daddy* (translated into Greek by D. Theodoraki). Athens: Kastor.

Pousaki, M. (2011). *M'aresi na ourliazo / I like to Scream*. Athens: Metaihmio.

Secondary sources

Beckett, S. (1999). *Transcending Boundaries. Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults*. New York & London: Garland.

Beckett, S. (2009). *Crossover Fiction. Global and Historical Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.

Bjorvand, A. M. (2010). Do Sons Inherit the Sins of their Fathers? An Analysis of the Picturebook *Angry Man*. In T. Colomer, B. Kummerling-Meibauer, C. Silva-Diaz (Eds.) *New Directions in Picturebook Research* (pp. 217-231). New York & London: Routledge.

Bosmajian, H. (2006). Reading the subconscious: Psychoanalytic Criticism. In P. Hunt (Ed.) *Understanding Literature for Children* (translated by H. Mitsopoulou) (pp. 183-201). Athens: Metehmio.

Gonzalez Cascallana, B. (2004). Crossing Over: The Reception of 'Kiddult' Fiction in Spain. In P. Pinsent (Ed.) *Books and Boundaries: Writers and their Audiences* (pp. 165-177). Staffordshire: Pied Piper Publishing.

Kashdan, S. (1999). *The Witch Must Die*. New York: Basic Books.

Kidd, K. (2011). *Freud in Oz. At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nodelman, P. (2008). *The Hidden Adult. Defining Children's Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Pinsent, P. (2004). Introduction: Crossing the Boundaries. In P. Pinsent (ed.) *Books and Boundaries: Writers and their Audiences* (pp. 3-7). Staffordshire: Pied Piper Publishing.

Rogge, J. U. (2006). *Fear Makes Children Stronger* (translated by E. Palantza). Athens: Thimari.

Rose, J. (1984). *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Basingstoke & London: Macmillan.

Schwenke Wyile, A. (2006). The Drama of Potentiality in Metafictive Picturebooks: Engaging Pictorialization in *Shortcut, Ooh-la-la,* and *Voices in the Park* (with Occasional Assistance from A. Wolf's *True Story*). *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 31 (2), 176-196.

Spufford, F. (2002). *The Child that Books Built*. London: Faber and Faber.

Stallcup, J. (2002). Power, Fear, and Children's Picture Books. *Children's Literature* 30, 125-158.

Zornado, J. (2001). *Inventing the Child. Culture, Ideology and the Story of Childhood*. New York & London: Garland.