



# **(Dis)Empowering Child Readers in the Golden Age of Children's Literature**

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# (Dis)Empowering Child Readers in the Golden Age of Children's Literature

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- 1 Victorian and Edwardian adult readers were used to being directly addressed by the narrators of the books they were reading. Jane Eyre, the homodiegetic narrator of Charlotte Brontë's eponymous novel, confided in them, telling them about her most intimate feelings; the narrator of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*<sup>1</sup> addressed his 'experienced', 'prudent', 'right-minded' or 'intelligent reader' to justify his narrating skills and coax them into trusting him; the narrator of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* saw (and constructed) them as earnestly sympathetic beings, able or eager to understand and relate to the working-class poor of Manchester; the narrator of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* gently reminded his readers he saw through their supposedly high morals. Victorian and Edwardian adult readers—along with subsequent adult readers of Victorian and Edwardian fiction—have been teased and played with by narrators implementing distancing strategies (Warhol 1989), or on the contrary, have been invited to sympathize with autobiographical narrators (Ablow 2012) or with real-world sufferers similar to the characters depicted in the books they read by engaging narrators (Warhol). Whether sincerely relating to their readers or ironically talking to them, authors of Victorian and Edwardian fiction for adults have been said to try to (re)create a simulacrum of face-to-face relationship between adult authors and readers in spite of the (geographic or temporal) distance between them. In her book devoted to what she calls talk fiction,<sup>2</sup> Irene Kacandes reminds us that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 'a sense of literature as "but a different name for conversation" had not yet been banned from the developing novel form' (Kacandes x), and that the period was characterized by a hybridizing of orality and textuality. Twenty years earlier, Walter Ong had indeed sensed that

nineteenth-century novelists kept addressing adult readers specifically as readers 'to remind themselves that they are not *telling* a story but *writing* one' (Ong 100, my emphasis).

- 2 Many first-person narrators of Victorian children's publications likewise referred to their readers as readers, just like their counterparts in adult literature: Frederick Marryat's narrator addresses his 'young readers' and his 'juvenile readers' in *The Children of the New Forest* (1847); R. M. Ballantyne's narrators in *The Coral Island* (1858) and *The Gorilla Hunters* (1861) do not specify the intended age of his audience but do address their readers either with the vocative 'reader' or with expressions such as 'I need scarcely say to my readers . . .' (chap. IV); George MacDonald's narrator in *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) only addresses his 'older readers' once, but his 'child-readers' on a more regular basis. A closer look at the passages in which these addresses to readers appear reveals that the oral-textual hybrid of adult literature is also a characteristic of these juvenile publications. Ballantyne's narrator in *The Coral Island* 'says' to his readers that his companion, Peterkin, uses non-literal expressions that he has a hard time understanding (chap. IV, my emphasis); Marryat's narrator thinks that his young readers need to 'hear some particulars about the other personages who have appeared in our little history' (chap. 27, my emphasis); MacDonald's narrator similarly often uses verbs such as 'tell'<sup>3</sup>, 'say'<sup>4</sup> or 'hear'<sup>5</sup>. Young readers of nineteenth-century publications may very well be acknowledged as readers; they are also constructed as listeners, as is suggested by the insistent use of the more encompassing 'you' and the less specific 'child' or 'children' (to the detriment of 'reader') in children's publications of the late Victorian era and the Edwardian era. Child readers of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries were not merely intermittently interpellated by narrators but constantly talked to. The voice of the Victorian storyteller, much discussed by Ivan Kreilkamp in the field of adult literature, proves to be as central in juvenile fiction.
- 3 In her analysis of the narrator's voice in children's fiction, Barbara Wall posits that nineteenth-century writers were, in effect, 'searching for a manner in which they could talk to children on paper as easily as they talked to the children they knew in their own lives' (Wall 40). Conversational relationships between narrators and young readers are, no doubt, central to that type of publication because children's authors of all time have frequently insisted that the books that they published grew from private conversations with children they knew (Grenby 14–15). This is famously the case of 19th-century writers such as Lewis Carroll (who improvised some episodes of *Alice's Adventures under Ground* [1862–64], which then served as a basis for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* [1865], while rowing a boat with Lorina, Alice and Edith Liddell), J. M. Barrie (who entertained the Llewelyn Davies boys with tales of a boy who would not grow up and later published *Peter Pan* [1904]) and Kenneth Grahame (who told his son Alastair stories he subsequently developed for *The Wind in the Willows* [1908]). Many other children's authors specify in the prefaces or dedications to their books that the stories they tell originated from conversations with children (for instance, Catherine Sinclair in *Holiday House* [1839], Mary Louisa Molesworth in *Four Winds Farm* [1887], or Rudyard Kipling in *Just So Stories* [1902]). These accounts of 'a tale told by a parent to a child, with publication only as an afterthought' have, in Grenby's words, been so frequent that they are 'more symbolic than biographical' (Grenby 15).
- 4 The recurrent addresses to young 'readers/listeners' so often featured in children's fiction alter the perception of the geographic and/or temporal distance between author

and reader. They give the impression that authors or narrators and readers are in the same room, or at least within hearing distance of one another. Accordingly, they constitute one of the signs that nineteenth-century authors of children's publications tried to foster and nurture intimate relationships with their young audience. Some authors combine their explicit addresses to their juvenile readers with hints at their responsibility as children's authors, who take their role extremely seriously and do their utmost to earn their young audience's trust. Thackeray's narrator in *The Rose and the Ring* (1854) insists that he 'must tell you [his readers/listeners] about the Princess's learning and accomplishments' (my emphasis); this leads him to be completely honest with his young readers about the Fairy Blackstick ('This obliges me to tell the truth', chap. II).

- 5 Many Victorian and Edwardian children's authors also regularly solicit their young readers' opinions; their narrators use a conversational tone, which is similar to that Aidan Chambers ascribes to Roald Dahl's narrator in *Danny: The Champion of the World*, a tone he claims is usual in children's books, 'the tone of a friendly adult storyteller' (Chambers 5). Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) and *The Nursery Alice* (1890) feature questions explicitly addressed to the reader (*The Nursery Alice* comprising, by far, the largest amount of questions of these three versions of Alice's adventures): 'fancy, curtseying as you're falling through the air! Do you think you could manage it?' (Carroll 2000, 14), 'Which do you think it was?' (Carroll 2000, 185) or 'Which would you have liked best, do you think, to be a little tiny Alice, no larger than a kitten, or a great tall Alice, with your head always knocking against the ceiling?' (Carroll 2010, 8). Such a narrator definitely matches Marah Gubar's description of a 'chatty narrator who addresses his young audience directly, often in a way that requires response' (Gubar 2009, 115). Maria Dinah Craik's narrator in *The Little Lambe Prince and his Travelling Cloak* (1875) also peppers his/her story with questions addressed to the readers and exclamations rendering the narration very conversational: after the bell (which is only heard when a member of the royal family passes away) strikes twenty, the age of the queen, the narrator shares the subjects' probable thoughts: 'Her Majesty was dead!'; when the population is said to be worried about the consequences for the country of the prince's inability to stand on his legs, the narrator adds: 'Rather a misfortune to him also, poor little boy!' (19); the narrator also invites the reader to imagine what the King looks like before Prince Dolor actually sees him ('what did he see?', 91). MacDonald's narrator similarly expects his young readers to be active recipients of his tale. He asks them: 'What do you think she saw?' (chap. 3) in *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), right before explaining that she saw her great-great-grandmother; the narrator imagines their reactions ('Perhaps my readers may be wondering what the goblins could be about, working all night long, seeing they never carried up the ore and sold it', chap. 7) and seems to require their active participation ('Guess what she was spinning,' being the concluding words of the third chapter). The tone employed by Molesworth's narrators also often implies that children's reactions are more than welcome. In *The Cuckoo Clock* (1877), the narrator invites the young reader inside the old house mentioned in the title of the first chapter with the question 'Shall we go inside to see more?'; in *'Carrots': Just a Little Boy* (1876), the narrator is very humble about his/her authority and even deems the juvenile audience more knowledgeable and perceptive than s/he is: 'Why Carrots should have come to have his history written I really cannot say. I must leave you, who understand

such things a good deal better than I, you, children, for whom the history is written, to find out' (chap. I).

- 6 M. O. Grenby sees assertions about the mythical origins of children's literature as endowing child readers 'with a *flattering* agency in the creation and conservation of stories' (Grenby 17, my emphasis), thereby questioning the sincerity of children's authors claiming that children truly participated in the creation of the story. Similarly, direct addresses to adult or child readers, either with what Garrett Stewart thinks is the prototypical address of the nineteenth-century address 'dear reader' or with the less individualized (or 'ambiguously numbered' as Alicia Williams puts it, 70) deictic 'you', and conversational relationships between authors or narrators and readers have been interpreted as falsely triggering reader participation. As Stewart has argued, this rhetorical device may be analysed as the sign of 'the relentless micromanagement of response in nineteenth-century narrative' (21), prompted, according to Patrick Brantlinger, by the anxiety many nineteenth-century authors felt about the mass reading public and the 'unpredictable' common reader, who may, if s/he is not properly guided, misread, misconstrue and ultimately distort their novels (Brantlinger 15-17). Issues of reader control have been said to underlie the widespread use of this rhetorical device in children's literature as well—children's fiction is meant for a child audience, but is more often than not written, selected and sometimes read aloud by adults. Education and entertainment were, indeed, closely intertwined in children's publications before the 20th century (Reynolds 9). Children's books in the eighteenth century 'regularly reminded readers of their ignorance, lack of experience, and fallibility' (Reynolds 15). And although children's literature, during the second half of the nineteenth century, started to feature more complex representations of children than the one of Enlightenment children's literature, i.e., 'the rational but ignorant child', 'a considerable body of badly written, heavily didactic writing for children was [still] published in the 19th century' (Reynolds 16). Victor Watson goes as far as to state that '[p]eople today are inclined to think of Victorian books for children as uniformly and drearily moralistic, but that is quite wrong. The best of them were *vigorously* and *persuasively* moralistic' (Watson 14). Additionally, even when children's literature is not 'drearily moralistic', it has been claimed to meet the needs of adults more than those of children, to be ultimately more adult-oriented than child-oriented. For Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984), children's fiction 'builds an image of the child inside the book . . . in order to secure the child who is outside the book' (Rose 2). In other words, child protagonists and implied child readers of children's fiction are by no means reflections of real children but adult fantasies about them, constructed by adult authors yearning 'for innocence, coherence and psychic balance' (Reynolds 45), with children's novelists perpetuating the myth of the virtuous child of nature. Perry Nodelman (1992, 2008) takes up Rose's premise that 'children's literature is a form of colonization' (Nodelman 1992, 29) and argues that children in juvenile fiction written by adult authors are portrayed as inherently inferior and passive, and that children's fiction purports to silence real children.<sup>6</sup> For Nodelman, children's literature constitutes, in effect, a form of adult domination, which needs to be analysed as such. Adult-authored children's texts 'assume the rights of adults to wield power and influence over children' (Nodelman 2008, 78) and not ignoring the power imbalance at the core of this type of literature is, he feels, necessary for both adult and child readers so as to better resist the ideology which it may conceal. Maria Nikolajeva further demonstrates that children's fiction is more often than not

conservative (Nikolajeva 11), as it is characterized by a fundamental aetionormative bias<sup>7</sup> generated by 'the unequal power position between sender and recipient' (Nikolajeva 120). This unequal power position, Barbara Wall contends, leads some authors to resort to condescending or patronizing narrators who 'write down' to children (Wall 13-18) or select what they think would 'satisfy adult standards of what was considered appropriate for children' (Wall 40).

- 7 However, this agonistic vision of power relationships in children's literature obscures, still according to Marah Gubar, the 'strikingly nuanced position' of many Golden Age authors, who 'acknowledg[ed] the pervasive and potentially coercive power of adult influence while nevertheless entertaining the possibility that children can be enabled and inspired by their inevitable inheritance' (Gubar 2009, 5). She convincingly argues that many nineteenth-century children's authors were '[s]elf-conscious about the fact that adult-produced stories shape[d] children' and 'represented children as capable of reshaping stories, conceiving of them as artful collaborators in the hope that—while a complete escape from adult influence is impossible—young people might dodge the fate of functioning as passive parrots' (Gubar 2009, 6). Indeed, children are regularly portrayed as able and willing to intervene in conversations or participate in the meaning-making or even storytelling process of many Victorian and Edwardian children's publications: Alice actively collaborates in the interpretative and creative reading of the poem 'Jabberwocky' (Gubar 2009, 116; Iché 175-76); young Ida, as Meghan Rosing explains, shapes the story Mrs Overtheway tells in Juliana Horatia Ewing's first children's book, *Mrs Overtheway's Remembrances* (1869); the very title of Mary Louisa Molesworth's *Tell Me a Story* (1875) 'pays tribute to the child listener as the incentive to narrative, and it represents as characters the real child auditors who contributed to its creation' (Ford Smith 76). Another way to 'help the young find their own voices' (Gubar 2009, 127) consists in employing child narrators, who are engaged in conversations with other child characters or with the child narratee(s). Despite the fact that literary critics and historians generally identify Charles Dickens's original use of child narrators in *Holiday Romance* (1868) only to 'jump directly to Nesbit' (Gubar 2009, 39) and the Bastable children trilogy, there were 'critically neglected women writers' (Gubar 2009, 40), such as Dinah Craik, Juliana Horatia Ewing, Mary Louisa Molesworth, who contributed to popularizing this technique and to encouraging young readers to 'become more aware of the societal pressures that affect their lives' and not just comply with 'adult desires' (Gubar 2009, 43). Finally, as Victoria Ford Smith shows it in *Between Generations: Collaborative Authorship in the Golden Age of Children's Literature*, 'the agentic, creative child was not only a figure but also an actor, vital to authorial practice' (Ford Smith 8). Relying on archival research as well as close readings of Golden Age children's books, Ford Smith challenges 'popular narratives of children's literature that read actual young people solely as idealized listeners or passive muses' (Ford Smith 7) and underlines how 'instrumental rather docile subjects' young people have been (Ford Smith 259). Without ignoring the potential coercion at the core of adult-child-relationships, Victorian and Edwardian publications for children seem to incite child readers to actively respond to the stories they read and not merely receive them passively, becoming, in effect, participants in the adult-child conversation.
- 8 The contributors to this special issue of *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* examine this tension between coercion and empowerment that children's fiction of all time, and children's publications of the Golden Age in particular, are characterized by. Studying adult-child conversations in all their forms in adult-authored publications for



children (whether they are conversations between characters, between adult narrators and child readers, or between child narrators and child readers) makes it possible to shed light on the ethics of addressing a younger audience. Some adult authors of children's fiction may have their narrators converse with young children or depict scenes of adult-child conversations to covertly 'conscript' the young audience, to use Stewart's choice of words for the subtitle of his book, to constrain children and their reactions, to have them conform to an ideal(istic) image of childhood and to indoctrinate them even, in keeping with the didactic origins of children's literature. Direct addresses to the child reader may conceal unilateral pressure under the guise of two-way conversations. Yet many Golden Age children's authors introduce conversations and direct addresses in their publications for a young audience so as to invite child readers to redress the adult-child power imbalance, to resist and creatively react to adults' potentially coercive strategies.

- 9 The first section of this issue is centred on the representation of intergenerational conversations in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children's fiction. Hannah Field and Hera Kim analyse the diegetic adult-child conversations of, respectively, Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) and some juvenile adaptations of Dickens's novel and Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906). Hannah Field shows that while diegetic adult-child conversations in Dickens's *David Copperfield* reflect the variety of adult-child relationships—from overbearing adults taking advantage of young David's incomplete perspective to respectful adults open to his child's viewpoint, adaptors of Dickens's 1850 novel tend to not only edit down conversations, but also fill in the conversational gaps for the child reader, thus erasing Dickens's preoccupation with age-related power relationships and the ethics of cross-writing. Hera Kim's article focuses on the conversations between adult figures from the past, magically summoned by Puck, and two children, Dan and Una, to underline the complex 'dynamics of agency' characterizing Kipling's book. According to Kim, in *Puck of Pook's Hill*, children and adults alike share a lack of agency—ultimately revealing the British Empire's vulnerability.
- 10 The second section of the issue is devoted to the study of adult-led conversations between adult narrators and child readers; it sheds light on the difficulties of guiding young readers without coercing them and the strategies some Golden Age authors developed to empower, nonetheless, their child readers. Laura Tosi demonstrates that Victorian and Edwardian adaptors of Shakespeare's plays wanted their adaptations to be widely read and appreciated by a young audience; accordingly, they talked to them in a congenial manner, but ultimately wished to remain in control of the interpretation of the original texts and never trusted young readers to make their own inferences. Matthew Dunleavy explores the correspondence pages of *Aunt Judy's Magazine* to determine how Aunt Judy's conversational tone—her directly addressing her audience, her appealing to her readers' emotions and imagining their reactions and even taking on their voice—was instrumental in persuading her child readers to support Great Ormond Street Hospital. Laura Clarke analyses how the adult narrator of Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863) seeks to convince the child reader of the importance of inductive reasoning, 'the process of making generalizations from specific observations', rather than deductive reasoning, 'the process of arriving at definite conclusions on the basis of general theories', without limiting himself or herself to empiricism. Clarke presents the two strategies (modelling the process of inductive



reason and lampooning deductive reasoning) deployed by Kingsley's narrator in his conversation with the child reader and his insistence on the need for scientists (whether adult or child) to combine inductive reason, poetic imagination and wonder to be able to use what Kingsley called 'reverent induction', 'the poetic wonder to recognize each act of induction . . . as God revealing Himself in material fact for human perception'. Audrey Doussot argues that George MacDonald's fairy stories (*At the Back of the North Wind* [1871], *The Princess and the Goblin* [1872], *The Princess and Curdie* [1882]) reveal the author's 'tendency to fulfil his pedagogical mission in a rather subversive way'; she contends MacDonald's carefully constructed narrative voice promotes a strong code of ethics while at the same time inviting readers with a childlike mind to use their intellectual faculties as well as their imagination 'to challenge commonly accepted discourses and values'.

- 11 The last section of this special issue tackles the complex question of the use of child narrators in adult-authored children's books. Isabelle Hervouet suggests that, although Charles Dickens himself described *Holiday Romance* (1868) as 'a grown-up joke', he does not ventriloquize the child narrators but treats them 'with the utmost respect'. While he believed that adults 'ha[d] lost a sense of what the world should be', Dickens does not picture children as naively pure or innocent; the child narrators and, arguably, the child readers they talk to, are constructed as insightful, creative and competent beings, who resist adult manipulation and can even teach adults a lesson on how to 'recapture their childlike vision and imagination'. Melissa Jenkins's article deals with the misunderstandings and misperceptions of the child narrator of Edith Nesbit's *Bastable* trilogy (1899, 1901, 1904), which endow children with unexpected agency, i.e. the power to challenge adult points of view regarding, namely, race and nation, thereby creating cross-cultural sympathies.
- 12 The contributions to this issue show how adult conversations with children in juvenile publications cannot be but entangled in ideological questions. As some authors of this issue have shown, moral and instructional tales still came out in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. They featured seemingly two-way conversations which closer analysis reveals to be actually unilateral instruction: adaptors of classics wished child readers to be acquainted with canonical texts while protecting them from what they considered to be improper passages or inappropriate interpretations of the texts they adapted (Field, Tosi)—therefore implicitly constructing children as 'deficient' (Gubar 2013)—or tried to (gently) mould their child readers' minds and instil piety and generosity in them (Dunleavy). However, other articles of this issue reveal that many 'chatty' writers of the Golden Age of children's literature, as Gubar calls them (Gubar 2009, 115), thought about their authoritative role and the power relationships underpinning the conversational interactions of the figure of the author with the child reader. Some children's authors urged their young audience to trust their imagination (Hervouet, Doussot, Clarke), their child's point of view (Jenkins, Hervouet, Field) and never to listen to authoritative figures without questioning them (Clarke, Doussot, Kim)—thereby announcing a shift in the perception of children from 'deficient' to agent.
- 13 This collection of articles pays attention to well-known publications for children of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and engages the discussion on fundamental issues in the field of children's literature studies (child control vs. child agency; silencing vs. empowering the child; talking down to vs. talking to children). It is the

first issue of *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* to be devoted to children's literature. Hopefully, it will not be the last!

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## NOTES

1. There have been many adaptations of *Oliver Twist* for children, but Dickens's original novel was not meant to be a children's book. Carolyn W. de La Oulton rightly points out that in *Oliver Twist*, '[t]he reader . . . is positioned as both a connoisseur of particular types of fiction and someone with experience of life outside the text' (De la Oulton 41)—namely marital experience.
  2. Though Irene Kacandes focuses on the secondary orality which she argues is prevalent in twentieth-century fiction, she goes back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when, she posits, what she calls the storytelling mode of talk fiction was common. She defines texts belonging to this mode as requiring the presence of listeners: 'In these texts, the presence of the listener is not just a convention but a necessity for the telling of the tale. The listening required for such tales must constitute a response that brings teller and listener into relationship' (Kacandes 38).
  3. 'I have been asked to tell you about the back of the north wind' is the incipit of *At the Back of the North Wind*.
  4. 'I may as well say at once that Diamond never told these things to any one.' (chap. X)
  5. "'Oh then," I think I hear some little reader say, "he could not have been a genius, for a genius finds out things without being told."' (chap. XXII)
  6. See also Chapter 4 of Joseph L. Zornado's *Inventing the Child*, in which he insists that nineteenth-century children's books feature an imperialistic ideology. For him, even if Lewis Carroll's narrative in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* 'explicitly attacks . . . the corrosive pleasures of the adult's manipulations of the child', it 'quietly celebrates' them (Zornado 118).
  7. Nikolajeva coins this word to discuss normativity related to age, *aeto-* meaning pertaining to age in Latin (Nikolajeva 8).
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