Elusive Childhood

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In the preceding chapters I hope to have demonstrated that children in literary discourse are generally constructed as linguistically, and thus narratively, isolated—more desirable because of their remote unknowability, enviable for their lack of schooling in a culture dominated by hyperliterate rationalist adults, and in turn idealized as flexible sites of possible resistance to rationalism (dependence upon systematized thought) and ideology (thought-systems themselves). Pressing for this idealized position, we imagine liberating childhood spaces for “children” while at the same time maintaining limits by controlling approaches to the institutionalized process that defines children, development. Seemingly freeing children to nurture their own development, we can vicariously indulge our own desires for freedom while saddling the young with our own standards.

As writers, readers, and consumers, we must be ever vigilant in promoting rhetoric that seems to empower and recognize multiplicity in those it situates (if necessary) as children, reducing the adult-serving biases we are able to detect. The closest example literary scholars have of a method for avoiding biased adult mediation is probably in the work of Peter and Iona Opie, nonacademics who entered schoolyards like an anthropological field, recording rhymes volunteered by young students. Of course, their completed manuscripts came from entirely outside of the schoolyard context, but the Opies set an example of the direction the most committed students of child culture might take if trying to circumvent barriers between themselves and the culture of those they call children. Another area of production that seems less exclusively mediated and one-sided than the literary canon is the comic book genre.¹

THE POSSIBILITIES OF UNKNOWING
Comics create an illusion of immediacy with young readers, uniting with them against the adult-world order. Alex Scobie explains that “as a medium the comic book strives more than any other printed literature to create the intimate rapport between producer and reader which is aimed at by oral storyteller and his listener-participants” (73). Perhaps for this reason such popular publications, including some interactive sites on the Internet today, can give us a better idea of what works with young readers and why. Comic books represent a more interactive genre “in the same way as an oral storyteller shapes his oral narrative in response to his listeners’ favourable or unfavourable reactions to his on-going performance,” by “inviting readers to write to the story editor [. . .] and express their views on any aspect of the comic from one issue to another. One page in every issue prints a selection of readers’ letters accompanied by editorial response” (79). Many challenge readers to find narrative inconsistencies or suggest future plotlines by writing in, giving a forum to their readers’ voices. This democratic reciprocity is achieved by “simulating oralcy,” which means, in the context of my analysis, rejecting more literate codes of narration.

In *Power Pack* (introduced in chapter 4) correspondence with the audience is published on the last page in a section called “The Pick of the Pack.” Significantly, readers have provided specific advice there concerning the linguistic representation of children, as in the following samples:

**Dear Louise, June and Bob,**

I bought *POWER PACK #1* and I’m glad I did because it’s the best thing to come from Marvel since the return of X-Men.

But I have one complaint—Katie’s way of talking! For a girl who looks five, she has a heck of a good vocabulary! I figure she should speak the way most other kids her age speak. For instance, she should say something like, “I shine bright. Me shoot stars at bad snakes!” Something to that effect!

—Joseph E. Perez (“Secrets”)

And

**Dear People that Pack Powers,**

I love *POWER PACK*! I’m 12 and I think *POWER PACK* is totally awesome! And I think you guys are narly and thanks a lot for making this
comic book! It’s the best thing since electricity. I got all my friends to collect it [. . .]

But could you ask Alex something—why does he always say “Gee” instead of “Wow” or “Narly” because “Gee” is old!

Thank you,
Jeff Butler (“The Kid Who Fell to Earth”)

One must wonder what Henry James would have done with such criticisms of his own work.

The difference this immediate rapport makes is clear in the graphic novel Shelter from the Storm (1989), which joins the Power Pack with Cloak and Dagger to help two young runaways. Its opening scenes introduce the main characters, Marjorie and Juan, by stressing the potential tyranny of adults. Juan is introduced in an archetypal struggle between abusive father and growing boy—he strikes his father to protect his mother and for the first time overpowers him. Meanwhile, Marjorie discovers that her parents have hidden her acceptance letters from Yale, Princeton, and Columbia to keep her close to them. She packs to run away, sobbing: “Their love is just a prison!” (5). Both teens flee their homes and meet at the bus station, where their adventure begins. Even the Power Pack children, who have a nurturing relationship with their parents (whom they “protect” from knowing of their superpowers), are introduced commenting on the frightening reality that parents can and do abandon children, suggested by a bedtime reading of “Hansel and Gretel” (10). The graphic novel so earnestly takes up the plight of the young that it even includes an ad for runaway safe-houses in the endpapers.

Creators of comics often assume that their audience needs to be listened to. They take on stock psychological themes as a form of group (reading) therapy. For example, in another scene Marjorie is actually imprisoned by a superpowered villain, and she reconsiders her decision to run away in a new light: wasn’t being imprisoned by love better than real walls? Her burst of emotion reveals the duplicity of adult power when it is one-sided—she imagines her parents calling her a “parasite” if she were to return, even though the lifestyle they tried to force on her was hyper-dependent, parasitic. From this point of view, a parent’s “love” is shown as being at odds with emancipation. The incongruity of developmentalism here is implicitly deconstructed: if we too simplistically equate guidance with maturity, we confuse love with control.

These examples point to a dangerous aspect of our nostalgia, not just
in that we impose it, but that it also carries the threat of our envy—we indulge in it as our own escape but impose it to prevent the escape of others. In our efforts to nurture and protect children, we enable full-scale solipsization of youth. Compulsory education also standardizes performance, to the point of stigmatizing those who “develop” slowly, and holds others back, as Daniel Cook has pointed out: “one effect of the emergent age-based systematization of knowledge and ability was to make intellectual precocity suspect, thereby placing, through institutional means, limits on how much children could achieve” (99). Protecting them from a right to work when they want to might also prolong idleness and postpone engagement with the community. What Viviana Zelizer has revealed about the flipside of child labor reform applies here on many levels: “For reformers, true parental love could only exist if the child was defined exclusively as an object of sentiment and not as an agent of production” (72). Denying any young person access to certain types of knowledge, or the right to choose a vocation at any age (rather than helping him/her to unionize or fight exploitation), is an infringement, not protection—it is robbing another person of their rightful agency—but we have morally twisted the imperative of protecting the innocence of childhood to the point that we usually fail to see it clearly, and even more rarely do we feel comfortable questioning it, lest we be accused of harshness toward those we should protect.

Rebekka Habermas dates this paradoxical paradigm from a shift in the nineteenth century, from necessary full-family involvement in labor to the ideal of disinterested or “selfless parenting,” which grew with the middle class as a result of its new affluence. Her analysis of German culture also applies to American experiences (and many have pointed out that in rural areas reciprocal family work existed as a norm longer). Although earlier families maintained more equity and balance out of interdependence, parental affluence changed that. Habermas compares two generations of a family exemplifying such a shift:

The Roths’ grandparents still believed themselves to be linked to their children by a relationship based on reciprocity, in which children contributed not only to the material and social but also to the emotional capital of their parents (and vice-versa), and also openly discussed these links as a form of mutual dependence. The Roths by contrast saw themselves as parents who were all-powerful, completely devoid of any needs on their side, and unselfishly loving, thereby reducing their children to the status of passive, willing, objects of this love. (46)
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The latter remains a current (and problematic) paradigm of parenting, as seen in Robert Munsch’s *Love You Forever* (1986), which protests this “selfless parenting” so much that it reeks of a caging possessiveness that makes love seem like a compulsive desire to stalk children and render them unconscious. A mother sings to her son (but only “if he was really asleep,” we are told repeatedly), “I’ll love you forever / [ . . . ] As long as I’m living / my baby you’ll be.” The direct message of the book, “I won’t stop loving you,” becomes an indirect threat as the child grows to be a man (after all, as long as she is living, he is supposed to be a baby), followed by “But sometimes on dark nights / the mother got into her car and drove / across town” (with a ladder on her car to gain access to her son’s [still] single bed upstairs). Despite this disturbing display of possessive and selfish parenting, the book has, according to the press release on amazon.com, “sold more than 15 million copies in paperback and the regular hardcover edition (as well as hundreds of thousands of copies in Spanish and French).” It has also been featured on an episode of *Friends*. Why? Because it flatters parents’ sentiments, not their children’s. Once children become, as Zelizer is quoted above as saying, “objects of sentiment” rather than agents of their own choosing, there seems no end to the projections and impositions that can be made in the name of nurturance.

These include robbing children of the agency to gain knowledge and freedom on their own terms. Ideal parental love, in its sentimental literary expressions, is far from disinterested—*Love You Forever* demonstrates the extent to which we ask child readers to take everything uncomfortable on faith to make ourselves comfortable. It is so focused on congratulating the mother for her tolerant and unending love that it elides the very fear most parents think they buy the book to address: fear of losing a parent. “As long as I’m living” might seem an admission that love has some conditions, like mortality, but the entire book testifies that Mother is not going anywhere—and neither is her son; she’ll always find him. The book even avoids the usual conflicts of “family romance” and the challenges of gender-identification by showing only mother and son, and then, his daughter (who comes as a surprise, as he seems to have no partner and the birth of the baby is not explained). We expect child readers to accept this unrealistic, uncomplicated, and over-secure image of the world they live in to make ourselves more comfortable with the lack of it.

Perhaps the acute awareness of this lack explains why we push for unquestioning belief in magic so much in texts where we indulge it. Take, as an example, Chris Van Allsburg’s *The Polar Express* (1985), in which a child journeys to the North Pole, meets Santa, and gets a bell from his
sleigh as a gift. On Christmas morning the boy discovers that his parents cannot hear the bell, which is consistent with the romantic construction of development as a fall. In the end, the boy, now an adult and our narrator, tells us that “At one time most of my friends could hear the bell, but as years passed, it fell silent for all of them. [ . . . ] Though I’ve grown old, the bell still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe.” Once again adult nostalgia cuts out an adult figure who is the exception to the rule; he does not fall from belief when growing up. But there is a double subtext here for the target audience. The boy still hears the bell because he knows it is magic—he went to the North Pole, saw the bell on Santa’s sleigh, and by still hearing it can remember the midnight magic journey that, in turn, is reified by the bell. However, what he suggests for his readers is necessarily different from knowing; it is to take his story on faith. Encouraging belief over validation is the same as pressing for acceptance rather than questioning—it is yet another infantilizing extension of romantic innocence/ignorance. After all, what is belief but an acceptance of not knowing in order to reduce a seemingly impossible desire to know?

Just like Marjorie’s parents’ imprisoning love, the sharp edge of our nostalgia often works against the freedoms of those we call children while the saccharine side hides our complicity, even from ourselves. We encourage the acceptance of a wish for something to be real over the reality itself. This agenda is often more pronounced in Disney and American film productions than the texts that inspire them—as in film adaptations of Peter Pan (not to mention, for those of us who remember, the peanut butter commercial), which dramatically expand the theme that wishing alone suffices, found in Tinkerbell’s near-death scene where “she could get well again if children believed in fairies” (125). In the most recent film adaptation, Peter Pan (2003), we no longer clap our hands but endlessly repeat a mantra (isn’t that useful in brainwashing?). Repeat after me: “I do believe in fairies.” Repeat. Again.

Perhaps the assumption is that belief is less dangerous than questioning. Questioning can lead to both knowledge and skepticism, neither of which has been encouraged in those we wish to keep “innocent.” Asking children to believe in magic postpones their need to question. Anthropologist Galina Lindquist equates magic with nostalgia (expressed as kitsch, in her study) because it “presents more than represents, evoking simple, but recognizable and widely shared, emotional states and experiential moods, feelings that are strong, basic and unreflected—this is what sentimentality is all about” (340). According to Weston La Barre, insisting on belief in magic, like superstition and religion, is a “group defense mechanism,” like
any “beliefs we still hold onto willy-nilly, regardless of common sense and experience, because they comfort us psychologically, or hide some unpleasant fact” (45). In fact, he interprets this stubbornness as a sign of human neoteny, retaining juvenile features in adulthood (although he could also be stereotyping juveniles as superstitious where convenient rather than pointing to a potential mental continuity between youth and age). If we accept the common tendency among all ages to “hold onto beliefs willy-nilly,” then we have to ask why magic is relegated to children’s books and religion is legitimated in more public contexts. What bias explains the dividing line? Adult choice.

Consider the following contrast. Edward Eager’s *Half Magic* (1954), the book that inspired the characterization of the Power children in the *Power Pack* series, indulges in the development-as-fall sentiment in its closure of the fantasy by eroding belief. The children can use a magic token because they are young enough to believe and understand, but they know that “no grown up ever will credit any story that has magic in it” (127). Yet an adult character *does* emerge as the exception to the rule. Mr. Smith is “sensible about magic, not like most grown ups at all,” and so, Jane, Mark, Katherine, and Martha trust him with using the magic token, too (147). Adult indulgence or mere coincidence? The book shows belief as something relative, eroding with age, but still (impossibly) within reach of adult choice.

In *Power Pack*, however, there are no adults who function as mediators or exceptions to the rule, no adults who can choose to be included in their heroics or even understand them. The kids are alone, without an adult mediator in their midst. In fact, reader Chris Saunders wrote in with the following suggestion: “I think that the Power Pack need *some* adult to guide them through the rough spots because they almost blew up their basement in #7!” (“Sea Hunt”). But their freedom is one of the greatest strengths of the series, as another reader, Robbie Thurman, gratefully puts it: “To the pack behind the Pack, Thank you for making the Power Pack kids not adults” (“Man and Dragon Man”).

The Power kids, like their literary predecessors, protect their parents from exposure to what they might not understand, in this case, their super-alien powers, endowed by Whitey (a Kymellian snark fighter) before he died. Whether to take things on faith becomes an explicit matter of choice for the children, who can question amongst themselves and debate freely. In an issue entitled “Rescue,” Jack tells Katie that “only stupid babies believe in the tooth fairy!” After giving her tooth as a gift to Whitey’s father, she finds a Kymellian coin under her pillow, clearly the workings of her now

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adopted “grandfather.” Yet they still refer to the giver as “she,” even though Katie points out that Jack has never even believed in a tooth fairy. The episode ends with the point that both children have the freedom to disagree and choose to believe what they want individually.

In a market and genre dominated by adults, it is impossible to eliminate our presence, but we can mediate less and withdraw adult-serving nostalgia and sentiment where we recognize it. Characterization in the Power Pack series is an example of what might result. Alex, the Mass Master, consistently says hurtful, stubborn, and nasty things. Katie throws seemingly sourceless tantrums, which is considerably dangerous in the beginning because she has not learned to control her lightning bolts (figure 7). She burns Alex’s hand when he tries to stop her fall, almost burns
their spaceship, Friday, and burns her own way through a floor out of fear, and early in her development of her superpowers, when her powers save the moment, it is as much due to accident as experimentation. But, because she and the others are free to interpret and learn from their mistakes, they seem invigorating—each is a believable adventure, a new challenge to overcome.

As cultural critics and readers, few of us are directly engaged in producing texts with “children” or collecting “authentic” child-lore. We may not enter the schoolyard, or publish kids online, or write comics with their input. We can, however, in contrast, see how far we have to go to avoid imposing our own standards while we read. And we can encourage this awareness in educators and parents who insist on reading texts for “children” with an impossibly conflicting set of adult-serving standards. Even in the context of my children’s literature classes, where I emphasize the dangers of generalizing about those we inconsistently define as children and the political suspiciousness of prescribing readings, I still have students mid-semester asking questions about such classics as *The Emerald City of Oz*, like, “can children understand this?” and objecting to *Pinocchio* on the grounds that “we’re supposed to entertain children, not scare them.” Our complete lack of objectivity becomes perfectly clear when we catch such detractors admitting to having loved the same books when they were young.

Joseph Zornado explains this contradiction and critical challenge as it plays out in his classrooms:

> Claiming that children do not pick up on everything around them masks adult resistance to their own history as children. My students resist the idea that children pick up on everything, and no one resists this idea more than those who work with or parent small children. We get defensive because we love our children and are invested in seeing ourselves as efficient and effective rulers of our petty kingdoms. To give up on this fiction means that I have to give up [ . . . ] my culturally bound, ego-driven claims to power over them [children], and moreover, that I must give up my ideological belief that [ . . . ] I own my children. (195)

We seem to cringe at our hypocrisies and unfairness as adults when we see it in print, and we have trouble accepting that just because we love certain individual children, that does not mean that we can absolutely know what is best for them and children in general, so we disregard popularity with current young readers as an indicator of literary success and worth. But, as
Gerard Jones suggests in *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes and Make-Believe Violence* (2002), we need to give up our attempts at predicting what young readers will like and why, instead giving them the chance to use texts as suits them best.

Cynicism and constructivist agendas aside, one cannot help but reconstruct childhood in deconstructing it, if only between the lines. If we romantically reverse developmental definitions of childhood so that it becomes an unavoidably eroding social space of pre-verbal and pre-ideological possibility, unknowable from an adult position and accepted as unknown, we cannot help but see in it unlimited subversive possibilities. Not simply subjects, objects, or outsiders but intermittently occupying each position, children could be defined as those who are “becoming.”

The most common distinguishing factor in Western definitions of children is level of language use. From the perspective of Gilles Deleuze, “becoming is itself coextensive with language” but “becoming unlimited” is an ideal directed by always recognizing the slippage and difference born with each utterance (8–9). In order to foster humans “becoming” on their own terms, negotiating their best interests in the world in which they will have to live, we have to learn to look at ourselves and re-evaluate our rhetoric for a keener detection of the arbitrary limitations we impose.