



Literature for Children: a Minority within Literature

Teresa Colomer¹

Spain/Catalonia

When the organisers of the Congress proposed this title for my presentation, I must confess that I had my doubts about its appropriateness. It gave me the impression that regarding literature for children as a spirited minority was more related to the past than to the present situation that we have managed to achieve over time. Nevertheless, the Congress convened us to an interesting modern perspective: understanding a socio-cultural field of study as a crossroads of conflict between minority and majority areas and tendencies. In this framework it seemed truly compulsory to provide a space for children's literature regarding it as literature in its own right. Therefore, I started to think about the challenges that a space for an *authentic literary experience* for boys and girls has posed to the different types of majority forces throughout its constitution. I identified eight main debates. An initial surprising discovery was to realise that I had witnessed all of them during my professional life. So, contrary to my initial feeling of "past", I came to the conclusion that the conflicts of a quality literature for children with respect to these eight spaces cannot be thought of as resolved in most cases, whilst in others it has hardly been considered.

1. Regarding literature of oral tradition: the story of a friendship

It is well known that the strength behind the birth of literature for children brought twins into the world: a part of folklore was specifically created for that audience. Sometime later, a few authors wrote for a few children in order to entertain them. In order to do this, these authors adopted a certain disregard for the rules and the adult world. Alison Lurie has provided us with an expressive title for this subversive force of classic children's stories: *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups* (1989). A complicity of estrangement from the actual surroundings was born, a respite for fiction and games. And until then, where could fiction and games for children be found if not in folklore?

¹ PhD in Educational Sciences. Senior lecturer at the Department of the Didactics of Language and Literature at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and one of the most outstanding investigators and specialists in literature for children and young readers.



In order to make way for a new space contrary to the ridiculous didactic books, authors inevitably turned to her sister, literature of oral tradition.

Both types of literature maintained their literary essence. Just like fugitives, they lived outside the law and outside the playpen of children's literature denounced by Graciela Montes (2001). Consequently this literary alliance not only had to push to be born, but has also shared the tension of being placed under suspicion in rising and falling waves throughout time. In the end, in the nineteen-seventies, the structuralist description of folklore and its meaning from the anthropological and psychoanalytical point of view seemed to definitively bring together not only the symbolic fantasy of folklore, but also the inexistence of themes forbidden for children in children's modern literature.

Notwithstanding, the conflict has endured with regard to more specific issues: What degree of violence and cruelty can be accepted in children's stories? Which cultural stereotypes should be avoided or renewed? Is it possible or convenient to betray the reader's confidence in the hero's victory? Not to uphold the expectation in the endings of stories? These are questions that appropriately explore the frontiers of the social debate directed at children. But sometimes they also conform to the perplexity of those who approach this corpus for the first time from an adult point of view. This can be understood by anyone who has been in a teacher training classroom or who is acquainted with the momentary controversies in the means of communication. As a result, for example, after certain unfortunate or misinterpreted statements by the Women's Institute in Spain, no less than ten authors of academic articles or reports from all types of authorities have eagerly interrogated me about sexism in popular stories.

Although they have played for the same side, both types of literature establish complex relationships between each other. In the last few decades there have been breakthroughs in the endeavours to specify them, x-rays that modify our ideas about those two constituent corpora. First of all, folklore studies have made us conscious of the fact that the productions that migrated were a trifling minority and that besides, they are losing strength among present-day young readers; they have also described the different types of modifications that they already suffered in this transition. Secondly, the formative supposition that folklore represents the first literary stage for youngsters



has been eradicated, given that, from the very outset, oral literature has coexisted with other channels for fiction, such as books for non-readers or audiovisual ones; an important change of perspective to develop the training of readers. Thirdly, we have discovered up to what point the present-day production of children's books has substantially broken away from the characteristics of folklore. Paradoxically, this does not mean that popular stories have the leading role of artistic forms that are very appropriate for writing, such as deliberate intertextuality and the will to reinterpret classics.

In this joint battle for the constitution of an authentic literature for children, new dangers have recently emerged, of which we will mention three: one is the loss of folklore in post-industrial societies. For some time now folklore has been forced to take refuge in schools in order to be passed on, but this bastion seems to be threatened by the new generations of teachers that do not possess that literary experience as their own and who do not find it in their scarce teacher training either. The second is that the audiovisual versions have inexorably imposed their characteristics on old stories and this has sterilised, in many cases, the literary power of the tradition. The third is the trivialisation of literature of oral tradition in countless modern versions that play pointlessly with the imaginary collective and that superficially reformulate it without extending its interpretative echo.

The conclusion in this field: the strength of an alliance that cannot be renounced.

2. Regarding pedagogy: the confusing struggle for independence

Literature for children was born in conflict with those books that “have all the marks of a Sunday school” according to the main character in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. Gaining independence with respect to the “pedagogic step-mother” became a professional and almost ethical project for a sector of authors, mediators and critics. “Literature against pedagogy” was the *raison d'être* for two conflicting sides which, as is the case in so many educational debates, extrapolated their arguments until they felt safe and comfortable. One side with their opinions, and the other with their practice.



Given that books for children made their appearance attached to compulsory schooling, schools became the main battlefield between the opposing standards of independent reading and school reading. Anne Marie Chartier and Jean Hébrard (1994) described for us the constitution of these arguments in the heart of western societies throughout the 20th century. And many other authors, such as Bruno Bettelheim and Karen Zelan (1981), revealed and denounced the artificiality and scarce efficiency of books to learn how to read, of books classified by academic years and ages, of books with contents excluded from school syllabuses or from the upheld ideology, although it may be antiauthoritarian; in short, books detached from the literary experience. Books featuring transversal values or the influence of political correctness have been the latest chapters in this story of dictated books.

And nevertheless, the reality always appears to be more complicated than the self-satisfied accusatory speeches. First of all because the literary field is not divided in two. The moral function does not confine itself to books for children. It has always been one of the purposes of popular literature, be they the lives of saints, 19th century newspaper serials, television series or the present-day mass-market fiction. There is no doubt, we can declare that the true educational function of literature eludes these simplistic schemes and operates at much more subtle levels. But it is an artistic option rather than intentional. For example, there is much one can say about the complexity of the artistic and educational relationships that are found in the genre base as noble as the epics or classic novels. Or about the *continuum* between the conscious or unconscious intentions of the works that reveal to us the human condition. Something which allows José M^a Merino (1997) to state in a comment to novelists of the 19th century:

our culture is loaded with types of behaviour that have been forged for generations and that have as a reference, to be exact, the models of behaviour developed in literary fictions, which have taught us, not only to think and feel, but also to understand our feelings and our attitudes, to diversify them and to put them in their place.

And even in its most openly didactic aspect, it does not seem that literature for children should dispense with a noteworthy quantity of books that play and create unquestionably didactic materials in an artistic way, such as the distinction of colours, the arithmetic numbers or specific themes regarding moral conduct.



Secondly, the relationship is more complicated because the debate between independent reading – art and entertainment – and school reading – training – has stopped being two-fold. Schools opened their doors decades ago to the non-didactic corpus of books and they also established a wide range of extremely diversified reading activities a long time ago, in and outside school time. Without a doubt, we will have to admit that new types of didactic books have crept through the same door. But it will also have to be verified that the backing down of educational judgements has simply lost ground to the conservative rules of the market.

Thirdly, the question is also easier to clarify because studies regarding the response to and the practice of reading reveal that books that strengthen readers are not always outstanding for their artistic quality. We still know very little about the impact of works on their readers; very little about the filters that make readers chose one element and avoid another; about the reading styles that often place the educational message in the activity of the reader and not in the characteristics of the text. All of this requires that attention be paid to the vision of the reader which obviously does not divide the texts into two piles.

The conclusion in this field: the strength of independence, properly understood, and the dignity of educational books.

3. Regarding children's literature without adjectives: opening up the ivory tower

Once a certain degree of autonomy had been gained with respect to pedagogy, children's books were considered to have enough merits to attract the attention of literary critics. As a result, they embarked upon a tenacious battle to be worthy of the word "literature" and not to simply be considered fiction, narrative, versification or dramatisation. Since the very beginning, literary studies had washed their hands of literature for children, regarding it, in an expressive metaphor by Lolo Rico (1986), as "sand castles in the face of true architecture". This contempt did not spread to folklore, given that, after all, it had not been created "for children". And classic children's novels were also tolerated with certain deference, given that, after all, they made reference to



the popular literature of modern societies. As a result, it is worth suspecting that for decades critics in reality only accepted their own works for children.

At our Congress in 2000, in fact I spoke about how this battle was being won (Colomer, 2002), so I will not go into details now. It is just worth mentioning that the road was hard. Then I said:

from the parameters of German idealism, from the symbolist aesthetic of the turn of the century, from Russian formalism, French and German stylistic or the Anglo-American New Criticism, what type of literary denseness could we expect from a text aimed at readers who are so incompetent?

At the turn of the nineteen seventies, there was an attempt to find a solution, proposing that literature for children and young readers was a specific literary genre. Therefore, under the influence of structuralism, a desperate search was begun to find signs of “literarity” in works for children. The objective was to demonstrate that they were from the same literary family as literature for adults, the same although “specific”. Fortunately, in the following decade, literary theory had already extended its interest towards the consideration of the reader and of the whole literary circuit for the works in a specific society. Given that literature for children is defined by its end user, that extension was essential. The former hierarchical axis of literary assessment, with the summit placed at the maximum literary tension of the shockwave of a poem, became a more varied and articulated ground, a ground which, for children’s literature critics, merged the analysis of the text, the response of the reader and educational mediation.

From this constituent story, the novelty in this last decade is that literary studies regarding children’s literature have intensified their development from a rich multidisciplinary perspective. Nowadays it is much more common to find investigation teams; university courses have multiplied; there is an abundance of web sites and review publications and there is an endless number of academic or dissemination meetings among all the sectors involved and in the majority of countries. The critics of literature for children have not only already selected and imported all manner of analytical instruments and results from other disciplines, but they have also started to challenge them with stimulating questions that have in fact emerged from the field



itself; because it is the possibility to formulate their own queries that defines a new perspective of knowledge, just like the one we have acquired.

The conclusion in this field: the strength of theory, the flagship of literary studies, new appraising glasses and a shockwave of knowledge.

4. Regarding the cultural debate: the relative conquest of the media

Demand in this field means a prolongation of the aforementioned desire for recognition, but in extent more than intensity. If those authors who have occasionally written for children, starting with Andersen himself, are bothered by the fact that their fame is linked to this “minor” product, the authors of children’s literature are bothered because they do not receive the more detailed or lengthier reviews for their works, on the understanding, in fact, that they should be just as praiseworthy as the brief mentions they now receive. As the sector slowly developed, there has been a generalised complaint regarding the “invisibility” of literature for children in cultural programmes, publications or in promotional campaigns by administrations.

First of all, it must be said that the amount of attention from the media is not surprising. On the one hand, it stems from the space that culture and children receive in social media coverage. On the other, the professionals in the communication sector do not receive training with regard to books for children and the conquests mentioned in the section above are alien to them, consequently, this perpetuates the old-fashioned hierarchy of cultural values.

Nevertheless, several recent phenomena have noticeably improved this situation. First of all, due to market pressure; because publishing phenomena such as Harry Potter and the emergence of fantasy, or of *Twilight* and the renaissance of sombre romanticisms have impressed the media, that have in turn realised the social and economic dimensions of this small cultural object, which had steadfastly been developing out of sight of the elitist vision of culture. Secondly, the sway of publishing towards adult best-sellers and of audiovisuals towards children in the society of the masses has offered a more natural niche for the attention to children’s literature. Thirdly, the democratisation brought about by new technology has imposed an important presence of websites, and of reading and debate clubs in social networks dedicated to



this theme. Perhaps some aspects of these phenomena are not great news for our idea of culture, but they probably are for the appeal of books for children.

The conclusion in this field: the strength of a small conquered space, although we may not be able to celebrate all of its motives.

5. Regarding types of leisure: the cobweb of reading promotion

To speak about children's books is to speak about the ways in which adults place them in the hands of children. Because schools were unable to carry out the objective of fostering stable readers, it was widely understood that forcing children to read lead to the loss of readers. As a result, the social outcry tipped the balance in favour of independent reading. The proposal to separate reading from schools and the conviction that "the verb *to read* has no imperative" created a new conflict between reading quality works and reading anything at all.

The promotion of reading was therefore not limited to the outside world, but it also invaded schools (Colomer, 2003). During the nineteen nineties, school corridors were patrolled by the most multifarious agents: professional storytellers, people from public institutions carrying briefcases full of marvellous worldly books, members of dramatic performances, puppet shows or poetry recitals contracted for workshops or specific celebrations, reading club organisers, authors willing to comment their books and publishing house salesmen with material and guides to tempt overwhelmed students. And although they were not physically present, numerous promoters also started to appear at the doorsteps of schools to offer their virtual support via authors' websites, publishing houses or education administration, the schools' own magazines or exchanges with readers from other centres.

The fact that so many people were interested in the promotion of reading could in fact have developed into an environment with a much greater number of requests and involvement in writing, but it could also have created a chaotic and frenzied activity whereby boys and girls would wander around complacently, but without any real impression on their reading habits. This objection slowly gathered strength. Once the fever of enthusiasm had subsided, the conflict was resolved in favour of establishing curricular and extracurricular responsibilities, coordinated projects and a more discreet



educational attitude based on helping children to confront texts that were worth their while reading (Colomer, 2002). A fact which reminded us that reading required silence, perseverance and collaboration.

The conclusion in this field: the strength of good reading, an accumulated understanding to share the playing field among the different agents worried about children's reading habits and to improve the way reading is taught in schools.

6. Regarding market laws: the tide of mediocrity

Literature for children has been developed as a cultural product in a consumer society, in such a way that its production context has suffered powerful transformations. Some of them good, and others bad. For children's literature and for all other types of books. On the one hand, we benefit from an immense variety of genres, titles and prices to choose from, from a vast movement of translations from every country and from the existence of prizes and professionalization possibilities for authors. On the other, we suffer production and mass-sales guidelines which give rise to good books being discontinued, to a spinning wheel that does not give other books time to know if in fact they are books or not, and to an increasing difficulty to select works and establish shared references. The conflict is expressed in the reiterated complaints of those who criticize publishing houses for losing their cultural criteria when confronted by those who define the real running of the market, which needs to establish itself as a business in order to survive.

The truth of the matter is that this is the hardest battle for quality literature. A tidal wave of mediocrity churns out thousands of new titles each year, threatening to sterilise the interest of readers' or to promote stereotypes, trends, didacticism and the most conservative values. Perhaps it would be better if children dedicated their time to other things instead of reading these books. Nevertheless, if quality children's literature also takes advantage of a powerful publishing industry, it is absurd to waste time revealing the new context and blaming the multinational industry. Instead, we should dedicate our time to assuming responsibility for a new critique which will allow us to separate the wheat from the chaff, although nowadays the chaff appears to be well protected by meticulous editing and sales strategies. And it is necessary to establish



collaboration networks between all the sectors in order to detect and promote the fragment of production that we are genuinely interested in.

The conclusion in this field: the strength of quality literature, the possibility to strengthen its collaboration.

7. Regarding image: a theoretical exploration and rising to the challenge

Of course, images have formed part of children's literature since it exists as such, but now they have been greatly strengthened by their presence in social communication, in new technical possibilities, in consumer sales strategies and in the tendency to merge present-day art codes. Children's literature has even provided an innovative artistic form in this field: the picture book. This achievement has provoked enthusiasm in all sectors. It could in fact be said that we have surrendered wholeheartedly to the beauty of these books, to the new possibilities that have been opened to artistic expression and to its ability to promote reading habits because they are spectacular books that attract our attention, that are easy to read, suggestive to interpret or adequate for short periods of time in classrooms or at home.

And nevertheless, there is a downside. Picture books fall within the context of the production features we mentioned in the previous section. Therefore there are many books that survive simply thanks to their consumer impact, plenty of books that unbalance the work with a bland text devoured by the image and others that hide their lack of preparation by passing onto the reader the responsibility of making sense of it all.

So much visual sparkle should not make us forget that linguistic thought is involved in any human interpretation, even those of images. The relationships between thought, language and visual interpretation have been the principal subject of different fields of study throughout the 20th century. Nowadays they represent a challenge to better understand how the reading of picture books works, up to what point the visual and linguistic competition develop in parallel or in collaboration, up to what point the reader merges the reading of codes or alternates it in a disruptive way. Research into this exploration has started with enthusiasm (Colomer, Kümmerling-Meibauer, Silva-Díaz, 2010a, 2010b).



And in practice, seeing many picture books today, we must remember that when there is text accompanying the image, its strength should be able to rise to the challenge so that the fusion can truly offer new levels of meaning. And it is worth mentioning that the interpretative learning of the text and image should also allow the reader to follow different paths of abilities in plastic arts and in literary writing. This opens an interesting point of conflict, a question regarding the effect of children's literature which has a predominant visual aspect and the capability to understand literary stories that are exclusively textual.

The conclusion in this field: the strength of images and the challenge for words.

8. Regarding new types of fiction: dealing out a new deck of cards

But the association of codes is already exploring even more diverse paths. Fiction is interested in exploring the effect of the association and the ambiguity of narrative elements on the perception of reality and it adopts new forms derived from new technology, with multi-modal alliances between images, the spoken and written word and digitalisation.

For quite some time any successful work establishes its particular itinerary of trajectories between different forms of communication. It can travel the more trodden path, like the successive journey of "Dark Materials" by Philip Pullman through the theatre, radio, book and cinema. Or make more sudden jumps, like those involving *The Lord of the Rings*, from the book to the role playing game and from here to the cinema over three quarters of a century. Or it can go even further when books are paired up to the screen from the moment they are born. In the transfer between screens, we are now also seeing the jump from television series to the cinema, or the intense convergence of cinema and videogames by means of the proliferation of game consoles. The interconnection that is brought about by new devices or the joint participation by means of the Internet, means that videogames are moving from boys' bedrooms to the family living room, recovering the socialised practice of the big screen. Therefore, the fast pace of technological innovations is giving rise to a very active fusion between screens, with the rapid development of mobile phones as the latest development.



These transitions entail a transfer of characteristics. If cinema and television have influenced literary writing for quite some time, now it is the migration between screens which defines some of the characteristics that take priority over mainstream cinema, such as speed, special effects or the lack of cohesion. And it could also be said, that in every type of fiction we see the rapid spread of the fragmentation of texts, the combination of fictional elements of different artistic systems, the allusion and recycling of well-known elements, the deployment of associated consumer products and the interactivity between works, authors and readers through the net.

How these characteristics affect quality literature for children and young readers is a subject under debate. Simply describing the changes does not lead us very far. The challenge is to achieve a fictional and literary experience just as powerful in the new context. The first thing that emerges in the critique is a feeling of loss because of the stable parameters that we use to assess the works. Therefore, if the literary world has been warning of the weakening of texts for quite some time, now it is the world of the cinema that is raising its voice to denounce the colonisation of the features of the seventh art at the hands of videogames. At the playing table a new deck of fictional and artistic cards has been dealt out and we cannot lose sight of the aces in order to know if they are transformed, if they grow in number or if they are swept away by the croupier.

The conclusion in this field: the strength of literary fiction, a query in the widening and diversification of approaches.

9. A permanently tense nucleus

We have reached the end of this journey, in which we have tried to visualise the strength that quality literature for children and young readers has needed to exert in order to untangle, construct, legitimise and maintain a nucleus of an authentic literary experience. We have before us a strange minority area which is condemned to sit at the same table with everyone, to maintain extensive, varied and intense relationships with all of the distinguished fields and to overcome the challenge of not dissolving into any of them. All of us here today are undoubtedly interested in this precise fragment of production, reception and mediation. But in order to safeguard its improvement and continuity, we now have at our disposal an advantage that we did not have at the



beginning. All of the professional sectors involved in this precise crossroads have made a considerable effort against some of its centrifugal forces. Nowadays, we possess more and better books than ever before and these books reach more children and in a more varied context than ever before in the history of humanity. Therefore we are certain of one thing that gives us strength: we know how to do it.

References

BETTELHEIM, B. and K. ZELAN (1981), *On Learning to Read. The Child's Fascination with Meaning*, New York: Knopf / *Aprender a leer*, Barcelona: Crítica, 1982.

CHARTIER, A. M. and J. HÉBRARD (1990), *Discours sur la lecture (1880-1980)*, Paris: BPI-Centre Georges Pompidou / *Discursos sobre la lectura (1880-1980)*, Barcelona: Gedisa, 1994.

COLOMER, T. (2002), "El papel de la mediación en la formación de lectores", in T. COLOMER, E. FERREIRO and F. GARRIDO, *Lecturas sobre lecturas*. México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, pgs. 9-29. Available on line: www.gretel.cat, "Documentos" section.

— (2002), "Nueva crítica para el nuevo siglo", in *CLIJ. Cuadernos de Literatura infantil y juvenil*, nº 145, pgs. 7-17. Available on line: www.gretel.cat, "Documentos" section.

— (2003), "La escuela y la promoción de la lectura", in *I Encuentro de Promotores de lectura, XVII Feria Internacional del Libro de Guadalajara*, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, CERLALC, Universidad de Guadalajara (Jalisco), Guadalajara (México). Available on line: www.gretel.cat, "Documentos" section.

COLOMER, T., B. KÜMMERLING-MEIBAUER and M.C. SILVA-DÍAZ (eds.) (2010a), *New Directions in Picturebook Research*, New York-London: Routledge.

— (coords.) (2010b), *Cruce de miradas: Nuevas aproximaciones al libro-álbum*, Barcelona: Banco del Libro-Gretel.

LURIE, A. (1990), *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups. Subversive Children's Literature*, London: Bloomsbury / *No se lo cuentes a los mayores. Literatura infantil, espacio subversivo*, Madrid: Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez, 1998.

MERINO, J. M. (1997), "León Tolstoi: La novela de un matrimonio", in *Revista de Libros*, nº 6, pg. 50.

MONTES, G. (2001), *El corral de la infancia*, México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2nd ed.

RICO DE ALBA, L. (1986), *Castillos de arena. Ensayo sobre literatura infantil*, Madrid: Alhambra.



Leer el Mundo
Read the World
Ler o Mundo