Current Contents

Past Issues

◻ Götz, Maya, Dafna Lemish, Amy Aidman & Jyesung Moon:

Children and their Make-Believe Worlds of Fantasy: when Harry Potter Meets Pokémon in Disneyland

Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum (2005) ISBN: 0-8058-5192-5 (pbk) pp. 229

◻ Mikkelsen, Nina:

Powerful Magic: Learning from Children's Responses to Fantasy Literature

New York: Teachers College Press (2005) ISBN: 0-8077-4595-2 pp. 193

Particip@tions Volume 4, Issue 2 (November 2007)

Reviews by Martin Barker

The last issue of *Participations* carried an essay arising from the on-going Baltic States research collaboration in reading reception. By Irma Hirsjävi, the essay examined the responses of young people in different countries to a fantasy story by Ursula K.Le Guin. It made me think how little research I knew of that deals with the meanings and reception of fantasy to audiences. In the course of working on an essay myself on this topic, I came across two other substantial pieces of work – one referenced by Hirsjävi herself – neither of which seems to be much known, even though they were published a while ago, and both of which are in my view very fine. This is therefore as much a publicity piece as a review, since I hope others will find them as useful as I have done.

Maya Götz and her colleagues conducted a project across four countries (Germany, USA, Israel and South Korea) exploring how children relate to fantasy. Their interest was especially in the role that media-generated fantasies may play in children's fantasy lives – and their target was the frequent claims about television, for instance, filling and dominating children's imaginations. Placing themselves very much within a humanistic tradition, in which the aim is to give children opportunities to put on display their working 'make-believe' worlds, they carried out pretty much parallel researches in the four countries, in order to see in what ways cultural influences might relate or change. Several central questions drove their research: what do children's make-believe worlds look like, and what patterns can be discerned among them (especially in the end around gender)? Where and how do children situate themselves within their make-believe

worlds, and what do they want to do inside them? And how do children incorporate elements from their media experiences within these worlds? Working with a total of 193 8-10 year olds, they combined talking with the children with getting them to write about and to draw their worlds.

After a delightful introductory case-study of one German girl, showing the complex ways in which her personal biography interweaves with her use of media resources, the bulk of the book is given over to a general account of the project's findings. They identify a number of over-arching 'worlds' within children's make-believe stories: worlds of harmony and peace, in which nature and animals play a large part (and this links, they argue later, with early ecological consciousness); worlds of threat and conflict, where children must use "allies, weapons, magic personal cunning, and special abilities" (48) to survive; along with worlds of amusement, driven by kinaesthetic pleasures, which the researchers group with the previous one as the second largest group in their sample; foreign lands, with the "pull of the exotic" (53) through which children imagine worlds beyond their immediate experience, and what it would be like to visit them; worlds of supernatural power, populated equally by strictly imaginary and media-sourced creatures, and largely cut off from children's lived worlds; and several others (worlds of sensual pleasure, travel, royalty, and technology). The point about these is that children consistently show a will to be active participants, wanting to play a role, to make a difference within these worlds, "in search of actions which empower them" (79). Their central argument is that the media provide children not just with worlds to enter, or materials to populate their worlds, but with shared scenarios through which they can communicate with others: "The media content serves as a common ground, a shared environment, a taken-for-granted world" (102) – but also as spaces where *their kind* must have a space to act. And this leads on to their central concern that currently most fantasy worlds are richer in possibilities for boys than for girls.

Girls are prone to more passive participation in their worlds, being 'beautiful in beautiful worlds'. Their activities are *caring* ones. And they note that girls' make-believe worlds evidence *fewer* media traces than boys – probably because, they argue, the available media worlds are more currently oriented to boys. Girls therefore have to work harder to create such imaginary spaces for themselves.

In a final chapter the researchers talk more broadly about the ways children's make-believe worlds show evidence of current globalisation trends. To their own surprise, they found little evidence of children fantasising about consumer goods. Brands just hardly appear. Local cultures make their presence felt at this age, but rarely at the level of real-world conflicts (for instance Israelis and Palestinians) – the make-believe world is a protected one, a space away from such real-world processes.

Nina Mikkelsen's book is a detailed study across time of children's uses of stories. Like Götz, she sets herself in opposition to a dominant cultural frame, this time the will to fragment children's learning from reading into SATS-measurable components. Instead, she wants to celebrate the rich ways children (from ages 5 onwards) integrate a whole series of skills as they manage making sense and deriving pleasure from fantasy stories: "No committee of adults, no commercial company, no textbook manual, no standardized test can determine or predict what a child should – or will – produce as a response" to their reading (51). Much less methodologically strict than Götz, Mikkelsen reports on her own child's development through encounters with fantasy books, as well as on the results of various classroom interventions. Among the things she demonstrates is the power of pictures to provoke meaning-making talk – she uses Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman* as an example, and challenging those critics who say that children's imaginative worlds must be built around word-literacies.

Mikkelsen's book works by striking example. She shows how individual children build what she calls "transactions" with the books they love – and that is vital to her argument, she insists on the importance of children reading and re-reading and being encouraged to build their own accounts of the ones that most resonate with them. So, at first reading, one component of a story – say, the Purple Pebble in *Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse* – might bemuse a child. But if they have a will to return to the book they are likely to build personal sense-making accounts which will simultaneously solve the narrative puzzle, enlarge their aesthetic response, build an account of motives and purposes, of right and wrong and fair and unfair, and of themselves as readers and agents – creating a combined set of "generative, literary, narrative, critical, personal/empathetic, and cociocultural literacies" (69). Children who engage with a story will resist the parts that are not right for them – and here Mikkelsen shows another similarity with Götz and her

colleagues in centering on the gendering of responses. Even *The Snowman*, she argues, although it may appear gender-neutral, was harder for girls than for boys to relate to.

There are strong similarities between these two books. Both mount a *defence* of children's rights to, and needs for, fantasy which may look undisciplined and directionless to adults. Both argue the complexity and purposiveness of children's fantasy involvements. I doubt that many of the traditional/conservative critics will be the least bit persuaded by their accounts, but I am. And I think a theorisation could readily be built which would link their work with the arguments of Vygotsky on children's developmental growth (although his name does not appear in either book).

I have two queries – not complaints – about these studies, which generally I just want to welcome and recommend. First, I wonder whether the attention to gender is now just too easy. Important, of course, but now the automatic port of call and too often the closure of critical analysis. Because it is so easy to distinguish boys and girls, rather than exploring other more complexly constructed distinctions, I wonder whether other important distinguishing features (class-based, for instance) may not be being missed. Second, I wonder what comes *after* this childhood stage. In both cases, the researchers mount terrific defences of the benefits to children of spaces for fantasising. Through these processes they discover a bit more of their humanity and potentials. So, having thus grown, does 'fantasy' become less important? It will remain open to those who dismiss fantasy as 'childish' to allow a brief space for such imaginative play – but then we had better down to the grim tasks of being properly adult. Since I came across these two books as I was working on the role of fantasy around *The Lord of the Rings*, that is a question that will not go away for me.

Contact (by e-mail): Martin Barker