theories and methodologies

On Not Defining Children's Literature

MARAH GUBAR

AS ROGER SALE HAS WRYLY OBSERVED, "EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IS UNTIL ASKED TO DEFINE IT" (1). THE REASONS WHY this unruly subject is so hard to delimit have been well canvassed. If we define it as literature read by young people, any text could potentially count as children's literature, including Dickens novels and pornography. That seems too broad, just as defining children's literature as anything that appears on a publisher-designated children's or "young adult" list seems too narrow, since it would exclude titles that appeared before eighteenth-century booksellers such as John Newbery set up shop, including the Aesopica, chapbooks, and conduct books. As numerous critics have noted, we cannot simply say that children's literature consists of literature written for children, since many famous examples—*Huckleberry Finn*, *Peter Pan*, *The Little Prince*—aimed to attract mixed audiences.[1] And, in any case, "children's literature is always written for both children and adults; to be published it needs to please at least some adults" (Clark 96). We might say that children's literature comprises texts addressed to children (among others) by authors who conceptualize young people as a distinct audience, one that requires a form of literature different in kind from that aimed at adults. Yet basing a definition on authorial intention seems problematic. Many famous children's writers have explicitly rejected the idea that they were writing for a particular age group,[2] and many books that were not written with young people in mind have nevertheless had their status as children's or young adult literature thrust upon them, either by publishers or by readers (or both).[3]

In his recent attempt to generate a working definition of this diverse group of texts, Perry Nodelman contends that "defining children's literature has been a major activity of children's literature criticism throughout its history" (*Hidden Adult* 136). I disagree. Certainly, influential children's literature critics have been arguing back and forth about whether or not it is possible to define their subject of study since this academic field came into being in the 1970s. But I would characterize these two groups—the definers and the

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antidefiners—as a small albeit vocal minority who tussle over this question while the vast, silent majority of scholars cheerfully carry on with their scholarship on specific texts, types, and eras of children's literature as though the lack of an overarching definition constituted no real impediment to their work. My purpose here is to justify this sanguine position by arguing that we can give up on the arduous and ultimately unenlightening task of generating a definition without giving up on the idea that "children's literature" is a coherent, viable category. More than that, I contend that we *should* abandon such activity, because insisting that children's literature is a genre characterized by recurrent traits is damaging to the field, obscuring rather than advancing our knowledge of this richly heterogeneous group of texts.

My argument hinges on the idea that a productive middle ground exists between the extreme positions adopted by the definers and the antidefiners. The antidefiners—John Rowe Townsend provides an early example—have suggested that it is impossible to define children's literature, raising serious objections to both the term and the concept. Regarding the term, they point out that the possessive "children's" falsely implies that young people own or control a body of texts that are generally written, published, reviewed, and bought by adults, and often read by them as well (Townsend, "Standards" 194). Regarding the concept, they note the existence of many texts by authors such as Rudyard Kipling that resist easy definition as one thing or the other, children's literature or not. "Since any line-drawing must be arbitrary," Townsend concludes, we should "abandon the attempt and say that there is no such thing as children's literature": just as "children are not a separate form of life from people," children's books are not a discrete and distinctive type of literature (196–97). Jacqueline Rose similarly deems children's fiction an "impossible" category because it rests on the false assumption that children are a homogenous group that can be straightforwardly defined and addressed (1). The form and content of children's literature, she contends, are determined solely by adult needs and desires: "There is no child behind the category 'children's fiction,' other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes" (10). Karín Lesnik-Oberstein not only rejects the categories "child" and "children's literature" but also characterizes children's literature criticism as a deeply misguided endeavor. She evinces frustration that most scholars who focus on this subject are simply carrying on rather than acknowledging the force of these "important philosophical arguments" concerning the impossibility of children's literature (229).

Skeptical about such radical claims, definers such as Myles McDowell, Zohar Shavit, and Nodelman observe that the presence of a muddy middle ground does not mean that *some* texts do not fall clearly into the category of children's literature. In 1973 McDowell helpfully proposed the analogy of paint pots: "A pot of green and a pot of orange paint might be spilled on the floor. . . . Where they run together a murky brown is formed that doesn't happily belong to either pot, but he is a fool who cannot distinguish the green from the orange" (51). Yet in responding so defensively to the challenge posed by the antidefiners, he and other definers go too far, insisting that it is possible to articulate the "essential ingredient[s]" of children's literature—to single out "defining characteristics" that set genuine children's texts apart as belonging to their own distinct genre (McDowell 58; Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 188).

While I am in sympathy with the desire to hold on to the category, this approach is flawed, since the idea that all children's texts share even a single trait that remains the same over time and across cultures is untenable. Because the field of international texts that have historically been regarded as chil-

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dren's literature is so large and varied, it is too easy to find counterexamples for each of the supposedly "universal structural traits and patterns" proposed by critics (Shavit xi). Indeed, the only way that definers can arrive at these traits in the first place is to rule huge amounts of relevant material out-of-bounds. For example, Shavit and Nodelman suggest that the category "children's literature" cannot contain any text penned before the modern (Western) concept of childhood emerged, a presentist conception of the subject that forecloses analysis of texts composed for children in earlier eras, such as *The Babees Book* (c. 1475) and *Derjungenknabenspiegel* ("The Boys' Mirror"; 1554). Similarly, Maria Nikolajeva excludes folktales, fairy tales, and "classics" such as the *Arabian Nights* and *Robinson Crusoe*—even those editions that were simplified and sanitized for young readers—on the grounds that they were not originally created for children, as if no amount of adaptation could transform an adult-oriented text into children's literature (14–20, 43).

In their drive to generalize, definers rely too heavily on authorial intention and often end up essentializing children or adults. For instance, McDowell declares that children's books differ from texts aimed at adults because "children think quantitatively differently than adults" (52): since children share a "schematic moral view of life," children's fiction is simple and formulaic (54); since children "are more active than ruminant," children's fiction is full of action, not description or introspection (55). More recent definers carefully refrain from generalizing about children yet end up making the same argument, contending that children's literature is "simpler and less complete than adult literature": children's books feature "plots that do not diverge greatly from the same basic story patterns" and eschew ambiguity, irony, sexual content, open-endedness, and moral equivocation (Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 264–65, 154–55). The difference is that contemporary critics blame the "simplified and reduced" nature of children's literature on "the binarism that underlies all adult thinking about children in the centuries in which a special children's literature has existed—the understanding of childhood purely in terms of its opposition to, lack of, and subordination to maturity" (Shavit 67; Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 209). Instead of essentializing children, such accounts stereotype adults, depicting them as beings who "always" insist on "the innocence and incapability" of children and who create a literature to inculcate this state of subjectivity into young minds (Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 45).

By characterizing children's literature in this reductive way, definers accept a key tenet of their opponents' argument: basing her case on *Peter Pan*, Rose famously depicted children's fiction as an adult-run activity that attempts to impose a static ideal of childhood purity on young people, and other antidefiners quickly followed suit.[4] Yet scholars have recently begun to question whether the ideology of innocence spread as quickly and comprehensively as such accounts suggest, even in the Anglo-American context from which Rose and others draw their exemplary texts.[5] In fact, Nodelman himself made this objection in 1985, before he embarked on his quest to determine the defining characteristics of children's literature. Reviewing Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan; or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, he protested that her representation of children's books as "simple, straightforward, unambiguous, and devoid of sexual content" was not just "limited" but "seriously wrong," since the very texts she focuses on—*Peter Pan*, Alan Garner's *Stone Book Quartet*—reveal that children's literature is often "rich in irony, in ambiguity, in linguistic subtlety, [and] even in truthful evocations of childhood sexuality" ("Case").

Nodelman's about-face on this issue illustrates how the attempt to find essential traits tends to narrow our vision, leading us to ignore, misread, or arbitrarily rule

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out-of-bounds texts that do not share these qualities. For instance, once scholars of Anglo-American children's literature convinced themselves that "golden age" texts were devoid of sex and satire, unconventional authors such as Tom Hood, E. L. Blanchard, and F. Anstey garnered no attention, despite their popular success. Similarly, because scholars presume that children's literature is an adult-run activity, the fascinating phenomenon of texts written by young people for young people has been excluded from serious study.[6] Overcorrecting for past accounts that took for granted children's involvement in children's literature, both definers and antidefiners cut young people out of the picture entirely: by their reckoning, nothing that actual children write, say, or do has any place in discussions of what constitutes children's literature.[7] How, then, to account for a story such as Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, which was not written for children yet garnered such enthusiastic responses from young readers that it was eventually republished as a children's book (xi–xviii)?

The definers and the antidefiners agree on another central and equally problematic point: both sides presume that the absence of a working definition of children's literature constitutes a major problem, undermining the validity of the category itself (Jones 288). But, as philosophers of language remind us, the idea that all viable concepts have definitions is profoundly controversial. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein famously denies this very point. He uses the example of games to illustrate how a category can exist even when the diverse array of things belonging to it—board games, Olympic games, the game of catch—have no one thing in common; rather, a complicated network of similarities crop up and disappear as we compare and contrast different types of games. Faced with complex phenomena of this kind, Wittgenstein says, we should eschew grand attempts to define or theorize about the category as a whole.

> Don't say: "There *must* be something in common, or they would not be called 'games'"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!—Look for example at board-games . . . [or] ball games . . . [or] games like ring-a-ring-a-roses. . . .

What games share, Wittgenstein proposes, is not an essential, universal trait but a "family resemblance" that manifests itself differently in specific cases, just as members of the same family are linked by various and shifting kinds of likenesses (31–32; pt. 1, secs. 66–67).

Wittgenstein's family-resemblance approach enables us to stake out a middle ground between the antidefiners and the definers: we have neither to throw out the concept of children's literature nor to unearth a common trait exhibited by all (and only) children's texts. The fact that something is very difficult to define—even "impossible to define exactly"—does not mean that it does not exist or cannot be talked about. In such cases, we simply have to accept that the concept under consideration is complex and capacious; it may also be unstable (its meaning shifts over time and across different cultures) and fuzzy at the edges (its boundaries are not fixed and exact). Childhood is one such concept; children's literature is another. True, there is no eternal essence that all children share—not even youth. (To a parent, a forty-year-old can be a child.) But it does not follow that the designation "child" has no meaning, that we cannot know anything about the lives, practices, and discourse of individual children from different times and places. Similarly, in order to expand our knowledge of children's literature as a whole, the best approach we can take is to proceed piecemeal, focusing our attention on different subareas and continually striving to characterize our subject in ways that acknowledge its messiness and diversity.

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The case of children's theater can be used to illustrate how the family-resemblance approach works and why it is needed. Until the twentieth century, drama was the main form of public entertainment available to all ages and classes, and some of the earliest works written especially for the young in countries such as England, Germany, and France were plays. Yet most accounts of the history and development of children's literature pay no attention to what is now called "theater for young audiences." Numerous factors have contributed to the neglect of this subfield, but one of them is that the rigidity of the two positions outlined above virtually ensures its exclusion from serious study. Antidefiners who mention this topic argue that dramas such as *Peter Pan* were created by and for adults; accordingly, there is no way to isolate children's theater as a dramatic category in its own right and thus no way to trace its history or contextualize individual plays. As for the definers, they ignore children's drama (and poetry, and nonfiction) in their drive to generalize; like their opponents, they have a bad habit of using "children's literature" and "children's fiction" as interchangeable terms. Drama in particular upsets their paradigm: both the format and the content of professional children's theater tend to subvert generalizations about the triumph of innocence in nineteenth-century children's literature, and figuring out which plays count as children's dramas often involves attending to the theatergoing practices of actual children.

Like children's literature in general, children's theater resists definition because it often appeals to mixed audiences of children and adults. Playwrights and producers know that adults are often the ones who bankroll children's trips to the theater, and they shape their shows accordingly. How, then, do we decide if a given drama should count as children's theater? The family-resemblance approach proves useful here. Wittgenstein exhorts us to look first at specific examples, and, indeed, the best way to figure out what constitutes a children's play in a given time and place is to study a wide range of productions that either represented themselves or were widely regarded as belonging to this category. While doing so, we can generate a list of textual and extratextual traits common to dramas that address themselves to children, which can in turn help us to identify other possible examples of this theatrical subgenre (which may then yield up still more characteristic traits). What we end up with is not a set definition of the term "children's play" but rather a constellation of criteria that we can refer to as we attempt to make distinctions among different kinds of productions.

If my investigation of the emergence of professional children's theater in England and the United States is any guide, the flexible list of criteria we can use to determine whether a drama counts as a children's play can be roughly divided into three groups. First, para- or peritextual aspects of a drama sometimes attest to children's status as a primary target audience, as when children are mentioned in a play's subtitle or in the preface to the published version of the script. Second, textual and generic aspects of the play often prove informative: lines of dialogue addressed to children; stage directions that presume children will be in the audience; scenes, characters, or plot lines copied from previous productions aimed explicitly at children; or the fact that a drama was adapted from a book widely considered to be for children.

Third, extratextual and intertheatrical information can reveal a great deal about the intended and actual audiences of a given production.[8] Did the show's creators—playwright, composer, choreographer, director, producer—leave a record of their intentions, in correspondence, memoirs, or public statements? Did they advertise the show as a children's play, mentioning daytime performances and reduced prices? Did peripheral events surrounding the show cater to children,[9] or

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did the program refer to their presence? Was the production part of a series that was understood as being for children or housed in a specially designated children's theater? All these questions relate to the issue of intention; other queries put the spotlight on reception. Did reviewers emphasize how child-oriented the performance was and dwell on the question of how children might (or did) react? Do we have proof of various kinds that children attended in large numbers? Did young people write fan letters to actors performing in the production or describe their reactions to the production in diaries, letters, statements to journalists, or writing contests run by periodicals?

Such competitions, which occurred in England and the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, may have been unique to the Anglo-American scene; scholars studying Russian or Japanese children's theater might turn up a different list of recurring traits. This is a key benefit of the family-resemblance approach: its flexibility allows critics to attend to cultural and temporal diversity while still borrowing from the work others have done on the same general topic. This approach also allows categories—"children's theater," "children's literature"—to remain fuzzy at the edges. Plays, stories, and poems do exist that resist simple categorization as one thing or the other, children's fare or not. The family-resemblance approach makes room for these borderline cases, since the list of characteristics generated need not coalesce into a set definition that triggers a simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down decision. It might—but if not, this model enables scholars to weigh the evidence for and against inclusion and engage in subjective interpretation: to decide, for example, that some traits count for more than others or to determine that the evidence for and against inclusion of a given text is so evenly balanced that no firm decision can be made.

While studying Anglo-American children's theater, I have not discovered a single characteristic shared by all professional children's plays that decisively differentiates them from dramas aimed at adults. And plays produced professionally constitute only one small subcategory of children's theater. At least in the United States and the United Kingdom, a thriving tradition of home and school theatricals performed by and for children preceded and paved the way for professional productions (Gubar, "*Peter Pan*"). Catering to this craze, publishers issued many volumes of dramas composed for children to enact at home, school, and church for an intergenerational audience of peers, relatives, and acquaintances. Further study of these amateur children's plays will likely reveal that they exhibit some (but not all) of the features common to professional plays, while sharing other qualities that their commercial counterparts lack. "In spinning a thread," Wittgenstein observes, "we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres" (32; pt. 1, sec. 67). If even one small subcategory of children's literature can only be defined in a loose, inexact way—by giving rise to a list of characteristics no one of which is shared by all children's plays—it seems evident that we should not waste our energy trying to generate a set definition of children's literature as a whole. The point is not that it is impossible to do but rather that any definition attentive to the glorious messiness and multiplicity of children's literature would be so long, complicated, and qualified that it would be of no value to us.

A final benefit of the family-resemblance approach is that it does not automatically deem the reading, writing, and viewing practices of children "irrelevant" and "impossible to gauge" (Hunt 120; Rose 9). To be sure, it is tempting to rule out-of-bounds any reference to actual children in scholarly discussions of children's literature because it allows us to avoid addressing the complex methodological and epistemological questions that inevitably

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arise when we seek out and interpret evidence about the opinions, habits, and activities of young people. But although we cannot generalize about how children as a group react to literature, we can and should make room for more particular discussions of how young people have responded to individual texts.[10] Cutting children out of the loop closes down inquiry, whereas acknowledging that their reading, viewing, and playing practices can function as one of the fibers that help determine whether a text counts as children's literature opens it up.[11] Instead of broadening our knowledge of the field, decades of debate driven by anxiety over the absence of an overarching definition of children's literature have resulted in the adoption of rigid and reductive accounts that contribute to the neglect of children's theater, children's writing, and other subareas in children's literature studies, while doing little to encourage the comparative study of children's texts from different cultural traditions (O'Sullivan). It is time to try a different approach.

Notes

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1. For *Huckleberry Finn*, see Clark 80–83; for *Peter Pan*, see Gubar, "*Peter Pan*"; for *Little Prince*, see Schiff 400.

2. Examples include P. L. Travers, Susan Cooper, Madeleine L'Engle, Rosemary Sutcliff, Scott O'Dell, and L. M. Boston (Honeyman 7; Cooper 98; Townsend, *Sense* 127, 201, 160, 36).

3. Shel Silverstein, Orson Scott Card, Frank and Ernestine Gilbreth, and Leon Garfield all wrote texts aimed at adults that later became known as children's books. This phenomenon is even more common in the world of young adult literature; see Rabb for examples.

4. Although Rose issues the disclaimer that her account "makes no claim to be a complete history of children's fiction," critics have disregarded this statement because she immediately adds that an investment in the child's innocent simplicity not only recurs but "predominate[s]" in the Anglo-American tradition (59). She also repeatedly generalizes about children's fiction as a whole in the course of making her argument (1–2, 8–9, 40–41).

5. Watson 4–10; Roth 160–64, 173; Reynolds 5–9; and Gubar, *Artful Dodgers* 3–38, 149–79.

6. Young authors of youth literature include Mimpsy Rhys, David Binney Putnam, Louise Abeita, Katharine Hull, Pamela Whitlock, Pamela Brown, S. E. Hinton, and Alexandra Elizabeth Sheedy. Many thanks to Anna Redcay, who is completing a dissertation on child writers at the University of Pittsburgh, for compiling this list.

7. E.g., Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 164, 148–49, and Rose 9.

8. Taking an intertheatrical approach involves looking beyond the specific occasion of a single performance "to include an awareness of the elements and interactions that make up the whole web of mutual understanding between potential audiences and their players" (Bratton 37). Just as an intertextual interpretation insists that no act of reading or writing occurs in isolation from others, an intertheatrical reading "seeks to articulate the mesh of connections between all kinds of theatre texts, and between texts and their users" (37).

9. Examples include toy and book giveaways, writing and designing contests, and the decoration of offstage areas (the box office, the house of the theater) to resemble playhouses or nurseries.

10. Obviously, not all children's literature scholars need engage in this type of work. Those who do must articulate their methodology clearly and acknowledge its limits repeatedly. Because the temptation to generalize about children is so strong, rigorous humility is required. As Karen Coats observes, "[R]eal children always exceed the sum total of our inquiry," so those of us who study the reading, writing, and viewing practices of young people should "endeavor to know as little as possible about our subject and to treat what knowledge we do have as provisional" (142, 148).

11. For more on the connection between children's play and children's literature, see Robin Bernstein's article in this issue of *PMLA*.

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