theories and methodologies

Comparative Children's Literature

EMER O'SULLIVAN

THE MOST STRIKING CHANGE IN CHILDREN'S CULTURE, INCLUDING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, OVER THE LAST FEW DECADES HAS BEEN ITS commercialization and globalization (O'Sullivan, *Comparative Children's Literature* 149–52). The children's book industry in the United States, the leading market, is increasingly dominated by a handful of large media conglomerates whose publishing operations are small sections of their entertainment businesses. As a consequence, as Daniel Hade observes, "the mass marketplace selects which books will survive, and thus the children's book becomes less a cultural and intellectual object and more an entertainment looking for mass appeal" (511). The influence of these multimedia giants is immense: manufacturing mass-produced goods for children, they sell their products beyond the borders of individual countries, further changing and globalizing what were once regionally contained children's cultures. As a discipline that engages with phenomena that transcend cultural and linguistic borders and also with specific social, literary, and linguistic contexts, comparative children's literature is a natural site in which to tease out the implications of these recent developments.

A challenge for comparative children's literature is therefore addressing and analyzing the globalization of children's literature and its concomitant "glocalization," which exists in the dialectic between global phenomenon and uniformity, on the one hand, and the resurgence of the local, on the other (Loriggio). Anna Katrina Gutierrez begins to address this challenge when she explores the relation between glocalization and the formation of national identity in picture-book retellings of four Philippine fairy tales from Severino Reyes's series Mga Kwento ni Lola Basyang 'Tales of Grandmother Basyang.' She shows how the tales carry on a tradition of appropriation and re-creation as the retellings transform them from postcolonial texts to glocal texts that give voice to the glocal Filipino child.

What is comparative children's literature and when did it begin? In 1932 a leading figure in the field of comparative studies, Paul Hazard, professor at the Collège de France and later member

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of the Académie française, published a book on children's literature at a time when this branch of literature hardly existed as far as academic criticism was concerned. *Les livres, les enfants et les hommes* is a plea for the right of children to imaginative, nondidactic books, and Hazard combined his regard for literary education with an account of the history of European traditions in children's literature.[1] Although he identified key areas of interest in cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and transhistorical aspects of children's literature, Hazard's study did not succeed in establishing it as a legitimate object of research among comparatists.

Children's literature has transcended linguistic borders since books specifically intended for young readers were first produced in eighteenth-century Europe, and it has evolved from international rather than national paradigms, so research should not be limited to "geographically internal texts and . . . those responsible for their production" (Bouckaert-Ghesquière 93). However, despite its reputation as a discipline that lives by constantly questioning and reformulating itself,[2] by adopting methods and subjects developed in other disciplines, and by extending its field to include literatures usually banished to the periphery of cultural discussion, comparative literature has, in the main, ignored children's literature.[3]

If contemporary comparative literature is "a method of approaching literature . . . that foregrounds the role of the reader but which is always mindful of the historical context in which the act of writing and the act of reading take place" (Bassnett 7) or an "intellectual and institutional space not where literatures [are] actually compared, but rather where experimental thinking relevant for the futures of the humanities [can] take place" (Gumbrecht 401), then it cannot afford to ignore a key field of cultural production that formulates a culture's identity for the following generations. Children's literature provides young readers with the vocabularies they need to read the world into which they venture; overtly or latently reflecting dominant social and cultural norms, it passes down information, beliefs, and customs, and it is the branch of literature read and shared by the greatest number of members of most communities. As a sanctioned location of intergenerational communication about group belonging, children's literature is a reservoir for the collective memory of national, regional, or ethnic groups. Thus, it is a particularly relevant and exciting object of inquiry for comparative literature.

Comparative children's literature questions the system of children's literature, its structure of communication and the economic, social, and cultural conditions that allow it to develop. What is characteristic, distinctive, and exclusive to individual children's literatures, as well as what they have in common, only emerges when different traditions confront each other. Comparative children's literature examines forms of literature from different areas and their various cultural and educational functions. Like mainstream comparative literature, it considers phenomena that cross the borders of a particular literature and places them in their linguistic, sociocultural, and literary contexts. It addresses intercultural phenomena, such as contact and transfer between literatures and the representation of images of self and others in the literature of a given language.

I would like to give a brief outline of the emerging field of comparative children's literature by sketching nine key areas of the discipline proposed in my *Comparative Children's Literature*. Not all these areas have received the same amount of scholarly attention; indeed some of them are no more than desiderata. But by naming the kinds of areas that can be mined and questions that can be asked, I hope to illustrate how rich a seam comparative children's literature is and how many stimulating areas are still awaiting serious scholarly attention.

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Theory of Children's Literature

Children's literature differs from other kinds of literature in two key respects. First, it is a body of literature that belongs simultaneously to the field of literature and the field of education: "Children's fiction belongs firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience" (Stephens 8). This aspect is particularly relevant when studying how children's literature is transferred. When the norms and values reflected in a target text conflict with those of a target audience, the text may be domesticated or adapted to conform to the target norms. The "negerkung" 'negro king' in Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Långstrump*, for instance, was transformed into a "cannibal king" in the United States translation because, as the editor commented, "It is fatal for us to refer to color of skin in a book" (Surmatz 242). If the conflict in norms is too great, nontranslation may result.

Second, the communication in children's literature is fundamentally asymmetrical. Production, publication, and marketing by authors and publishing houses; the part played by critics, librarians, booksellers, and teachers as intermediaries—at every stage of literary communication we find adults acting for children. The asymmetry of communication also emerges when an implied (adult) author addresses an implied (child) reader and accounts for other forms of address—single (to the child reader alone), dual, and multiple, which can include implicit adult readers and child readers at different stages. A general theory that forms the basis of comparative children's literature has to examine how children's literature tries to bridge the distance between adult and child in terms of their command of language, their experience of the world, and their position in society by adapting language, subject matter, and formal and thematic features to correspond to the children's stage of development and the repertory of skills they have acquired.

Contact and Transfer Studies

Contact and transfer studies examines all forms of cultural exchange among children's literatures from different countries, languages, and cultures—contact, transfer (by translation, adaptation, or otherwise), reception, multilateral influences, and so on. It asks, for instance, how a translated (and adapted) novel such as *The Swiss Family Robinson* can be marketed and sold as a classic in Britain when the original has long been forgotten in German-speaking countries, discusses why Enid Blyton's adventures are usually transferred onto target cultural settings (French, Spanish) in their translated versions, or tries to explain the belated acceptance of nonsense as a literary form for children, evident in the differing ways *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was translated into German from 1869 to the present.[4] An urgent matter for scrutiny is the direction of the flow of cultural products, the trade balance of translations of children's literature—which literatures are translated and which aren't—and the determining factors. Seventy to ninety percent of books available to reading children in non-European and non-American cultures are by European or American authors, but children's books by non-European and non-American authors rarely cross the linguistic, political, and cultural divide to partake in the Western market; translations account for no more than one to two percent of children's books in Britain and the United States. Culture-specific attitudes toward foreign literature ("Our children won't understand that") are only one of many determining factors that hinder translation in the dominant anglophone cultures; economics is the predominant one.

Critical interest in translation is buoyant today, with such issues as ideological differences and censorship (Craig; Thomson-Wohlgemuth), cultural context adaptations (Wunderlich and Morrissey), the status of translators (Lathey, *Role*), and translating

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the visual (van Meerbergen) at the center of attention.[5] The single modern author whose international reception has been most intensively investigated is without doubt Lindgren, because of the significance of her influence on children's literature, especially in postwar Europe (Surmatz).

Comparative Poetics

The poetics of children's literature addresses the aesthetic dimension of this branch of literature. Comparative poetics concerns itself with the aesthetic development of children's literature and with changes in its forms and functions in different cultures. A fitting subject is, for instance, how (and why) the beginnings of the new, complex, literary children's literature, which embraces techniques common to the psychological novel, can be traced back to the end of the 1950s in England, the 1960s in Sweden, and around 1970 in Germany (Nikolajeva), and why this form has taken longer to be accepted and produced in other children's literatures. Narrative methods, structural features (motifs and themes, such as the treatment of death in children's literature across time and cultures), and aesthetic categories like humor are further potential areas of investigation in this relatively underdeveloped field. A model to be emulated is Peter Grotzer's comprehensive study of adolescence in canonical English, German, French, and American literature (James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Robert Musil's *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless*, Herman Hesse's *Unterm Rad*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'enfance d'un chef*, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, and others), in which Grotzer examines how the concepts of youth and youthfulness are translated into literary characters, probes their metaphorical function, and uses the concept of the second birth to explore themes of revolt and conformity, showing how it is an essential step in individual emancipation.

Intertextuality Studies

Some of the earliest children's books were adaptations of existing ones for adults—for example, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Children's literature has from its inception been an intertextual literature of adaptations and retellings (Stephens and McCallum). Retellings, parodies, and simple, subtle, and complex forms of interaction between literatures from different languages and cultures are among the subjects of intertextuality studies. They include analyses of instances of marked intertextuality, in which the links between pretext and intertext are explicit, such as Kirsten Boie's collection of episodic tales *Wir Kinder aus dem Möwenweg*, an homage to Lindgren's *Alla vi barn i Bullerbyn*. Boie's title echoes the German title of Lindgren's book, *Wir Kinder aus Bullerbü*, and Boie aims to capture the spirit, style, and structure of Lindgren's original while replacing the environment and social conditions of rural Sweden at the beginning of the twentieth century with the setting of urban Germany at the beginning of the twenty-first. Some other instances of intertextuality are not as easily detectable; an interesting example is Christoph Hein's *Das Wildpferd unterm Kachelofen: Ein schönes dickes Buch von Jakob Borg und seinen Freunden*, a novel published in East Germany in 1984 about toys that come to life in tales shared by a man and a boy in a framework story. It echoes A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* in structure, elements of plot, characterization, and themes of friendship and imagination. An intertextual investigation shows how these resonances underline the central differences: the treatment of childhood as utopia and the status of imagination in both works.[6]

Intermediality Studies

Comparative literature has always concerned itself with studying and comparing different cultural codes (in, e.g., the visual arts, dance,

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music, cinema, the theater). Children's literature and children's culture are even more distinguished by their intermediality than adult literature and adult culture. In children's literature and culture, there is a synergistic relation between stories and characters that originally appear in print and the forms into which they are subsequently transformed across media boundaries: film, video, DVD, audio adaptations, text-based toys and commodities (e.g., china and clothing displaying book characters), computer programs, and theme parks. Intermediality in children's literature studies goes beyond examining the forms and consequences of changes among media to observe and criticize the way the new media impacts texts for children, both thematically and on the formal and aesthetic plane. Multimedia phenomena represent a new challenge to children's literature studies, and critics are asking whether tie-ins actually change the way children read (Mackey).

Image Studies

Image studies, or imagology, is traditionally concerned with intercultural relations in terms of mutual perceptions, images and self-images, and their representation in literature. It investigates "the complex links between literary discourse, on the one hand, and national identity constructs, on the other" (Leerssen 270). Image studies might analyze culture-specific topographies in children's literature (e.g., the Alps, the garden, the forest, or the outback [Tabbert]); images of home and how cultural, national, or regional identity is linked with landscape (Rutschmann); or even how national image constructs may act as a filter in the translation process. In spite of its striking popularity in most countries, the Canadian classic *Anne of Green Gables*, by L. M. Montgomery, was not translated into German until the mid-1980s, and the translation was based on the film version. The reason why it was virtually ignored until then is linked with the image of Canada in German culture, which Martina Seifert identified as one of a wilderness inhabited by men and boys. She found that the feminized, small-town world of *Anne of Green Gables* "simply did not represent what German publishers were looking for when importing Canadian literature" (235). The images of a particular country in the target literature play a decisive part in determining which books from that country are selected and translated and how they are marketed.

Image studies also examines aesthetic aspects of the representation of foreigners, demonstrating how authors bring stereotypes into play to confirm or contradict readers' expectations, how they omit them in places where they are expected, or how they subvert them in a playful manner. The extratextual function of national stereotypes—such as the propagandistic portrayal of village life in Alsace, with its cast of good Alsations and French and bad Germans, in the pre–World War I picture books by Hansi[7]—and the consistency and change in representations of specific groups over a period of time and through changing historical conditions are further objects of image studies.[8] *Ent-Fernungen*, by Gina Weinkauff and Martina Seifert, is the most comprehensive and detailed study of the representation of other nationalities and cultural transfer in children's literature to date; it examines German children's literature published from 1945 to 2000.

Comparative Genre Studies

Comparative genre studies addresses how genres—such as the school story, girls' books, or the adventure novel—develop in the context of national and international traditions. For example, it could be said that fantasy, which has become one of the key genres of children's literature, was founded in Germany with E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Nußknacker und Mäusekönig* but that its subsequent development took place in other countries (Ewers).

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Hans Christian Andersen initially carried the legacy of fantasy from German Romanticism to the field of children's literature in Denmark in the early nineteenth century. Then the tradition of fantasy reached new heights in mid-nineteenth-century England with the works of George MacDonald and Lewis Carroll and, somewhat later, E. Nesbit. Works from the golden age of English fantasy began to be received in Sweden and from there finally reentered Germany, its country of origin, through the 1949 German translation of Lindgren's *Pippi Långstrump*. This led, for the first time since the Romantic era, to a favorable climate for the reception and creation of fantasy for children in Germany and later encouraged a boom in this genre by German authors such as Michael Ende and Cornelia Funke.

Comparative Historiography of Children's Literature

Comparative historiography studies the writing of the history of children's literature. It is interested in the criteria according to which histories and accounts of various children's literatures are produced and calls for a discussion of the cultural, social, economic, and educational conditions necessary for this literature to develop. Some recent semiotic models of children's literature postulate identical phases of development for children's literature following similar patterns in all cultures (Shavit, *Poetics*) or a universal progression from didactism to diversity (Nikolajeva). A comparative history of children's literature, however, would have to take into account the socioeconomic and cultural conditions that encourage or hinder development, to register how the unique histories of postcolonial children's literatures differ from the postulated standard model based on northwestern European countries (Britain, Germany, France).

There is still no comparative history of children's literatures from different cultures that takes account of the conditions in which they arose and developed. While the articles on countries and regions in Peter Hunt's *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* provide an excellent starting point for comparison, their organization is not such that the information may be easily compared. A major problem in comparative historiography arises from the degree to which the history of children's literature is documented in individual countries or linguistic areas and the manner of its organization. It may be organized according to genres, themes, authors, or historical periods or written from the disciplinary perspective of literary history, educational history, the history of the book, or library studies. These perspectives, in turn, may reflect the state of research in different countries.

Comparative History of Children's Literature Studies

The comparative history of children's literature studies is a metacritical dimension of comparative children's literature that involves looking at the study of children's literature and how its point of focus depends on where it is undertaken. This study is, naturally, influenced by how the subject is institutionally established in different cultures. In France, for instance, children's literature was studied in the context of popular or paraliterature, a field hardly accepted as part of the academic system in other European countries in the 1950s.[9] In Germany, on the other hand, the discussion of children's literature before the 1960s was almost entirely confined to the pedagogical sector, primarily in centers of teacher training. The history of children's literature research in England is one of individual scholars such as F. J. Harvey Darton, whose masterly social and literary study *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life* is still consulted today. However, on an institutional level, there was no professorial chair for children's literature studies until the end of the 1990s; for a

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long time, children's literature featured in England—as in the United States—mainly in the training of librarians.

Conclusion

Children's literature studies has, in the past, been fond of assuming that its international corpus has transcended cultural and linguistic borders. This too is a legacy of Hazard, who coined the term "la république universelle de l'enfance" 'the world republic of childhood' (*Livres* 192; *Books* vii), a romantic vision of unlimited exchange of children's books across borders and international understanding that at times has functioned as an ideology, as a catchword implying that children throughout the world are all the same. It is a romantic vision of small beings who magically commune with their counterparts in the whole world without any of the concomitant problems of language, culture, religion, or race. This ignores the real conditions of childhood in different parts of the world as well as the possibilities of children's communication across borders with their peers. Comparative children's literature, by examining texts in their historical and cultural contexts and probing the modes of its (non)transfer, is a genuine antidote to such romantic notions of international children's literature; it is also ideally positioned to address the real contemporary phenomenon of its globalization.

Notes

1. The English translation, *Books, Children, and Men*, was issued in 1944.

2. The title of an article by Eva Kushner, "Is Comparative Literature Ready for the Twenty-First Century?" is typical for the long tradition of self-questioning in a discipline that occasionally proclaims its own death. In a collection of essays that bears a variation of that proclamation as its title, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that the only way forward for the declining discipline of comparative literature is to move beyond its eurocentric origins and the parameters of Western literatures to reposition itself in a planetary context.

3. Exceptions include a flurry of interest around the mid-1990s: the International Federation of Modern Languages and Literatures addressed the topic during a conference in 1996 (Neubauer), and three established journals—*Poetics Today* (Shavit, *Children's Literature*), *Compar(a)ison* (Kümmerling-Maibauer), and *New Comparison* (Brown)—dedicated special issues to comparative aspects of children's literature. More recently an issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* was devoted to racialized narratives for children (King and Streamas).

4. There have been more than thirty complete German translations of *Alice in Wonderland*; they are analyzed in O'Sullivan, *Kinderliterarische* 296–378.

5. The comprehensive reader by Lathey (*Translation*) presents a good selection of important contributions.

6. Through his reference to and reinterpretation of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Hein signals his admiration for Milne's book as a model of children's literature. At the same time, by realigning the relationship between child and adult, he underscores his demand for more respect for the child. See O'Sullivan, *Comparative Children's Literature* 34–36.

7. Hansi is the pseudonym of Jean-Jacques Waltz.

8. O'Sullivan, "Children's Literature" provides a survey of work in the area.

9. One of the first university chairs for children's literature in France (at the Sorbonne) was devoted to "littérature populaire et enfantine" 'popular and children's literature.'

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