Readers: Characterized, Implied, Actual
—Mavis Reimer

In its Fall 2010 issue, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* has published a special section assessing the impact on the study of texts for young people of Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* twenty-five years after it first appeared. Reading the essays collected for the section prompted me to remember my first encounter with Rose's book and the bold claim on its opening pages that

> [c]hildren's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but that it hangs on an impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child. Children's fiction is clearly about that relation, but it has the remarkable characteristic of being about something which it hardly ever talks of. Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author,

maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between. (1–2)

As reviewers of the book recognized, this statement not only advanced an argument about J. M. Barrie's perplexed text and the ways in which Peter Pan might illustrate something about fiction for young people in general, but it also announced a challenge to the assumptions and the terms of the criticism of those texts as it was generally undertaken at the time. That critical discourse, as the co-editors of the *ChLAQ* section, David Rudd and Anthony Pavlik, suggest, often stopped at "celebrating the aesthetic and literary qualities of texts" on the way to "finding books suitable for children of different ages and backgrounds" (223). I was then an M.A. (with a thesis on Jacobean drama in hand) who had found (under)employment as a contract instructor in children's literature on the

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strength of having taken some courses in the subject from Perry Nodelman. My return to the undergraduate classroom after my graduate degree had itself been an attempt to figure out why, despite my advanced studies in the aesthetic and literary qualities of texts, I did not know much about how to locate good books for my daughter amid the stacks of Disney tie-ins and bland picture books on offer everywhere. My ignorance, as I came to realize in Nodelman's classroom, was both a matter of the low status of the study of texts for young people within the academy—so that, as an Honours student, I had never been introduced systematically to this body of work and had to rely primarily on what I remembered of my own childhood reading—and a matter of the style of the texts, their apparent simplicity and coherence covering contradictory subtexts and hiding the operations of the conventions that permit the reading of any text. The gap between writer and the reader addressed by texts for young people was an established fact well before Rose published her book, as she recognized when she suggested that scholarship in the field "rests openly" on it (2). At least from the time of the publication of Harvey Darton's history of English children's books in 1932, scholars had known that "children's literature" could not exist "until adults came to believe that children were different from adults in ways that made them need a literature of their own" (Nodelman and Reimer 81). But it was Rose's theoretical vocabulary that made me recognize something new: it was not only that I had not been taught about children's books or had become such a practiced reader that I no longer paid attention to the assumptions on which those practices were predicated, but also that the culture itself wanted or even required the habituated unknowingness of adults like me in order

to sustain itself. "It will not be an issue here of what the child wants," Rose asserted, "but of what the adult desires—desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of its speech" (2). The implications of this seemed to me worth unpacking. When I returned to study for my Ph.D., I turned to the study of texts for young people and to the search for models of reading adequate to that study.

Reading the *ChLAQ* essays also prompted me to consider what has and has not changed in the field since Rose "rattl[ed] the cage of children's literature criticism" (Rudd and Pavlik 224). The study of these texts now usually takes place within some formation of cultural studies and assumes that "the child" is a constructed category deployed within cultures for specific, interested purposes (often identified as "political" purposes) rather than a natural category of human being. It is this shift in the discourse of the field that *Jeunesse* has registered in the mandate it has defined for itself and the shift that I glimpsed on my first reading of Rose. What has not changed much—or not changed widely—is the rhetorical reliance on the figure of "the child." Several of the *ChLAQ* pieces refer to *children's literature* and *child reader* as though those descriptors, having passed through the theoretical revaluations under discussion, can continue to be used as unmarked and unironic terms in critical discourse. But, if the force of the revaluations has been to destabilize and denaturalize those very categories,

they can no longer be counted on to convey meaning. That they have ceased to serve is indicated, I think, by the accusations and counter-accusations about the improper uses of the language of *the child* and *children* that are being levelled by critics in the field against one another at present, charges that often invoke the name of Rose.

There are a number of possible paths that could be explored to change the subject, among them the attempts to find new labels for texts and readers, such as those proposed by Katherine Jones: child literature, generational literature, age role, and others. But, as Gabrielle Owen comments about Jones's proposals, "inventing new categories" does not necessarily lead to a better understanding of "existing categories and their power dynamics" (271n10). As significant a problem, it seems to me, is that Jones's terms continue to appeal to age as a primary descriptor of text and reader. One of the implications of a view of "the child" as a cultural construction is that both *child* and the term in opposition to which it is defined, *adult*, are understood to index positions within a system rather than to have intrinsic content in and of themselves. "The child," then, is a position to which many categories of human beings can be, and are, assigned: indigenous people often are made to occupy the role in colonial discourses, for example, as were some women in Victorian discourses. Exactly because "the child" is a site at which overlapping and

disjunctive meanings circulate, the use of the term as a descriptor of a reader is fraught with difficulties, as is evident from criticism in the field. Focusing on "the child" reader to whom texts for young people ostensibly are directed typically results in reports of the reception of particular texts by particular children, which are not necessarily generalizable, or requires the postulation of a hypothetical "child" reader. Such a postulation, however, almost invariably produces this reader by reifying common cultural assumptions about children, among them the foundational assumption of the unlikeness of adult and child. In the circularity of this scenario—a circularity that the contributors to Karín Lesnik-Obserstein's *Children's Literature: New Approaches* demonstrate and deconstruct—"the child" reader typically is presumed to be limited where "the adult" critic is capable, innocent where the critic is knowing. A description of the functioning of the position assigned to "the child" in the reading (or, more generally, interpretative) situation, then, would seem to require a less "rich" or meaningful term. Rather than invent a new vocabulary, however, we might look back into the history of criticism of texts for young people and bring forward a term that was hailed by critics when it first appeared as an important heuristic to bring to the study of these texts: the implied reader.

For Wolfgang Iser, with whom the term is most closely associated, the implied reader is a concept "firmly planted in the structure of the text" (34), a pre-structured role or position from which the text is most obviously intelligible and which actual readers are invited to take up. Aidan Chambers, whose article "The Reader in the Book" was first published in the British journal *Signal* in 1977, points out the implications of Iser's concept for critics of texts for young people, observing that it allows critics both "to understand a book better and to discover the reader it seeks" (354) through a consideration of the book's characteristic style, its point of view, and the gaps it asks readers to fill. As Neil Cocks demonstrates in a virtuosic reading of Chambers's essay, the distinctions between "real" readers and implied readers with which Chambers begins repeatedly collapse in the course of his argument. But that Chambers can be shown to have used his terms inconsistently does not mean that the terms themselves are not useful ones. Introducing Chambers's ideas and sources to a North American audience in 1983, Peggy Whalen-Levitt described the notion of the implied reader somewhat differently— and, I would argue, more helpfully—in terms of the activities readers are asked to undertake: "Above all, the literary communication perspective encourages us to describe children's literature in terms of what a given text calls upon a reader to know and to do: to know, in terms of experience of both life and literature; to do, in terms of producing a meaning for this particular text, in time, from start to finish" (159). The questions Whalen-Levitt proposes could be extended to include, among

other things, what a text calls upon a reader to enjoy or to value, or not to know, or not to do. Such questions cannot be answered by assigning the implied reader to one of the categories of race, gender, class, or age conventionally used to describe human subjects—girl, boy, adult, child, servant, master, and so on—but by describing a set of knowledges and decoding skills. The reading position defined by such a set is likely to be available to many different human subjects or to be amenable to being learned by them.

Like any interpretative procedure, defining the implied reader of a text is not an objective, scientific process—that is, it will not always produce the same results regardless of who asks the questions or of the contexts in which the questions are posed. Indeed, conceptualizing the implied reader as a set of knowledges and skills makes it possible to think beyond a single anthropomorphized figure to imagine a range of reading positions from which the text is legible—from the minimum of skills and knowledges needed to decode a text to something approaching an ideal reader, who is able to fill in all of the gaps in the text and to trace the intertexts from which the text is woven. As Harry E. Shaw observes, a narrow construal of the term makes it particularly useful for "specifying matters buried so deeply in culture that they precede and undergird the realm of . . . conscious persuasion" (302), a definition that accords with Terry Eagleton's explication of the bundle of conventions that

"obliquely posits a putative reader" and "intimates . . . the way it is to be consumed" (48). These conventions, Eagleton concludes, might be said to encode "the ideology of how, by whom and for whom [the text] was produced" (48). Understanding the implied reader in this way also makes it possible to register the differences among readers implied by texts for young people both within one system and across time, differences that tend to be obscured or confused if all of these readers are identified by the same term, as "child" readers. Because texts for young people often feature child characters and child narrators, some of what an implied reader is likely to be asked to do is to take a position on, or in relation to, the textual representations and manifestations of childhood. While that position is often one of agreement or alignment with "the child inside the book" (Rose 2), it is not necessarily so.

Actual or "real" readers who respond with engaged pleasure to a text are usually assumed to be taking up the role of the implied reader offered to them. Chambers's description of such actual readers as "implicated reader[s]" who give themselves over to the books, however, has occasioned more distress than enthusiasm among ideological critics of texts for young people (364). In his influential article on "Ideology and the Children's Book," for example, Peter Hollindale proposes that the way in which readers are guided to build coherence in a text should be understood as

the most potent instance of its ideology (32); and it is with Hollindale's argument that John Stephens begins his detailed examination of the ways and means of the "linguistic encoding of ideology" in children's fiction (11). Stephens remarks in his comments about Chambers's article that the "internalization of the text's implicit ideologies" is "a process of subjection" of the actual reader (10). But there are also other ways in which actual readers engage with texts, as researchers who study audiences have observed. Theorizing the communicative processes of television in the 1970s, Stuart Hall proposed that paying more attention to the situations of decoding would help "to dispel the lingering behaviourism" in reception studies (131). He identified three positions from which decodings may be constructed, although he cautioned that these positions would need to be "empirically tested and refined" (136). His framework has been widely borrowed by cultural critics, not only those who study TV texts. The three positions are the dominant-hegemonic position, which describes an actual reader like Chambers's "implicated reader"; the negotiated position, a reader who acknowledges the rules of the texts but "operates with exceptions to the rule" (137); and the oppositional position, a reader who joins "the struggle in discourse" by refusing "the message in the preferred code" and reading it rather "within some alternative framework of reference" (138). This last position is one often occupied by critics.

The Series of Unfortunate Events books published by Daniel Handler under the pseudonym Lemony Snicket between 1999 and 2005 provide a useful illustration of the need for a careful vocabulary that distinguishes between characterized, implied, and actual readers, as Susie K. Taylor discovered in the analysis she undertook for her Honours English thesis at the University of Winnipeg under my direction.[1] Handler notoriously has maintained a scornful distance from the system of texts for young people into which his series was written. In a 2000 interview, for example, he tells the story of his initial resistance to his agent's suggestion that he write for children: "my reaction was that I couldn't write for children because children's books are such crap" ("Daniel Handler"). In a 2001 interview, he recounts his expectation that the books would "never get in the hands of kids": "I thought teachers would be revolted and librarians would be offended and all the guardians of children's culture would be horrified" ("FaceTime"). Such assumptions about the state of books for young people are ubiquitous in the texts, peritexts, and supplementary texts of the Snicket series, with readers repeatedly being warned by the narrator that they would be "better off reading some other book" (*A Bad Beginning* 1) that would allow them to "wriggle over the lovely things" that happen to characters in "adorable adventures" (*Vile Village* 2). The putative endings of conventional books for young people are a

particular target of mockery: "If this were a book written for small children, you would know what would happen next. With the villain's identity and evil plans exposed, the police would arrive on the scene and place him in a jail for the rest of his life, and the plucky youngsters would go out for pizza and live happily ever after" (*The Reptile Room* 175). Snicket assumes that a reader might have "picked up this book by mistake" (*Vile Village*, back cover) and advises the reader to "put[] this book down at once and read[] something happy" (*A Bad Beginning*, back cover). A better choice for the fictive reader Snicket characterizes is likely to be the bogus but "delightfully appropriate book" that is advertised on one side of the dust cover for *The Unauthorized Autobiography* and that promises its readers "a hayload of happiness."

As the narrator's emphasis on the reader's choice in reading materials makes clear, however, this fictive reader is not the only possible reader of texts for young people. Indeed, the fictive reader is not the implied reader of the Snicket series, but rather a foil for the implied reader. W. Daniel Wilson observes that fictive readers who are explicitly characterized in texts, most commonly through the direct address of the narrator, frequently are "satirized readers whose behavior the author does not wish his intended readers to emulate" (849). The implied reader in such cases—the pre-structured role or position from which the text is most obviously intelligible—is a position constructed in reaction to the characterized reader. In the case of the Snicket series, that role is defined by a dismissive attitude to the characterized reader's preferences and strategies, an attitude of scorn for a naive reader of the sort who enjoys escaping into fantasies of pleasant worlds and happy endings. Indeed, we might say that the implied

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Cultural commentators and reviewers of the Snicket books often repeat the analysis of the books provided for them by Daniel Handler outside the books and by Lemony Snicket inside the books, reproducing as their own judgments the self-evaluation expressed in the series. The Snicket books are said, for example, to take a much-appreciated "militantly anti-Pollyanna stance" on the world (Abrams), to have broken "all the rules of children's publishing" without, "[i]mpressively," ever condescending to readers ("Run for Your Lives!"), and to be "childhood reading incarnate" but to break "every rule known to children's writing in accomplishing this feat" (Wynne-Jones). If we assume that actual readers who respond with engaged pleasure to a text are taking up the role of the implied reader offered to them, then these actual adult readers must be counted among the implicated readers of the series. To return to the formulation I used earlier, these actual readers possess and use the set of knowledges and decoding skills characteristic of the implied reader of the Snicket texts, a set that includes scorning conventional texts for young people and aligning oneself with attitudes that are coded as transgressive.

Laurie Langbauer, arguing that the Snicket series "debunk[s] what it considers the pieties of its predecessors and impart[s] its own vision of ethics" (502), describes this vision as "adolescent" in the sense that it "encompasses the otherwise irreconcilable categories of child and adult" (505). Curiously, she insists on this description despite observing that the Snicket series is marketed both to eight- to fourteen-year-olds and to Generation X adults and "might seem to bypass adolescence altogether" (505). I am not persuaded that an ethical practice can ever be founded on the production and denigration of a fictive other. In the context of this discussion, however, what is most noteworthy is that Langbauer reaches for another age-based descriptor in order to imagine what it might mean for children and adults to be understood as sharing "some mutual human contingency and obligation" (505). Breaching the line between "child" and "adult," as those categories currently are constructed in culture, clearly is a difficult conceptual move. Critics who work with texts for young people can begin to do so, I have been arguing, by refusing to use *child* and *adult* as unmarked terms in their analysis of reading positions—by making them strange.

In his historical overview of the various iterations of the narrative communication diagram—which schematizes the relations of "real" author, implied author, and narrator to narratee (what I have been calling the characterized reader), implied reader, and "real" or actual reader—Shaw argues that the variations reveal not only that the simple situation of "someone telling a story to someone else" is "susceptible to

different emphases," but also that different theorists take different kinds of narrative to be normative (300). In the case of texts for young people—as this label, like the label *children's literature*, implies—the emphasis typically falls on the side of the addressee, that is, on characterized readers, implied readers, and actual readers. The essays in this issue of *Jeunesse* explore some of the many ways that these readers of texts for young people can be and have been imagined, manipulated, and engaged.

Using the framework of Jacques Lacan's discussion of the mirror stage, Perry Nodelman studies a number of "baby books" to consider how the implied readers/viewers of these books are asked to think of themselves both as like the vulnerable infants in the books and as active and responsible observers of other infants. While arguing that Mordecai Richler's *Jacob Two-Two and the Hooded Fang* is a rewriting of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Brian Gibson focuses on the different assumptions made about children in the Victorian text and the modern text, suggesting that the texts also invite different reading practices. Caroline de Launay teases out a reading of the unstable relations of the Muggles and wizarding worlds in the Harry Potter books from a careful parsing of the scenes that describe passages between the two worlds. She situates her reading as a contribution to the critical culture she shares with other expert readers of the books. Rachel Hendershot Parkin discusses the attempts to control the meanings of the

texts by actual, highly engaged readers of Stephenie Meyer's Twilight saga, and proposes that Hans Robert Jauss's concept of "the horizon of expectation" can help critics to understand this fandom phenomenon.

The review essays also work with a number of different assumptions about young readers and the texts directed to them. Adam Muller demonstrates that writers who struggle to represent the unimaginable violence of such historical events as the Holocaust to young readers use many of the same strategies as writers for adults do. Reviewing Mélanie Watt's picture books about Scaredy Squirrel and Chester the cat, Laurent Poliquin focuses on the ways in which Watt's metafictional techniques allow their implied readers to deconstruct the narratives at the same time as they build coherence. Catherine Tosenberger begins from the premise that actual young readers are likely to use the books about Neo-Paganism she discusses as resources for their own investigations into religious beliefs and practices.

The forum on Participatory Ontologies and Youth Cultures featured in this issue moves away from an exclusive focus on texts to consider more broadly how contemporary culture seeks to construct young people. Forum convenor Stuart R. Poyntz outlines the terms of what he calls "the participation paradox": because of developments in consumer media, young people have increasing opportunities to produce texts for themselves and others, but, at the same time, such participation can be and is nurtured for profit by media corporations.

It seems, then, that it may be their active participation in producing meaning that secures young people in the regulatory regimes of neo-liberal capitalism. In the essays that follow, Zoë Druick looks back to a number of participatory film projects of the 1960s to inquire into the conditions that made it possible to imagine a democratic public and to attempt to bring it into being at that time; Clare Bradford argues that a contemporary text for young people such as M. T. Anderson's *Feed* implies readers who will critique the society represented in the text and suggests that actual readers are likely to extend such critique to the society outside the text; and Darin Barney claims that participation has always been one of the most effective mechanisms for the depoliticization of citizens. It is not the activities of young people, he maintains, but their refusal to participate that is fatal to established regimes.

The forum essays reveal the significant investment in young people and in ideas about young people being made by educational, social, cultural, political, and market economies. It is clear that unpacking the desires that circulate around children and youth continues to be a central issue for any study of the texts and cultures said to be theirs.

Note

[1] Used here with her permission are observations from Taylor's "A Series of Unfortunate Events: Detection, Consumption and Waste in the Snicket Text," a paper based on her Honours thesis, presented to members of the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg on March 26, 2007.

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