



10.2478/abcsj-2023-0014

Charlotte Beyer. *Contemporary Children's and Young Adult Literature: Writing Back to History and Oppression*. Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021. Hardback, 61.99 GBP.

Children's literature has long been considered an inferior type of literature, of little value and relevance. It is significant that writers of literature addressed to children would not sign their work in the past, publishing it anonymously, or under a pseudonym. This type of literature was looked upon as having mainly an educational or pedagogic dimension, not being a legitimate field of study with its own intrinsic value. As Zohar Shavit, one of the best-known theoreticians in the field, argued in her 1986 seminal study entitled *The Poetics of Children's Literature* which put the subject on the map, "there was no room for research of texts that were considered inferior or of little literary merit. This is perhaps most tellingly revealed in the amount of space devoted to children's literature in various national histories of literature and culture, in encyclopedias, and in curricula of university literature departments" (ix). Sadly, up until the 1980s, these cultural institutions had largely disregarded children's literature, and even when attention was given to it, it was usually approached either in order to teach literacy and particular skills, or from the perspective of educational theory and practice.

However, things have started to change in recent years. In the last two decades of the 20th century, important work was done, especially in putting together national histories of children's literature. Scholarly research started gaining momentum in our century, so much so that new directions emerged. In her insightful book entitled *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (2007), Kimberley Reynolds identified five distinct trends that have emerged in children's literature scholarship: studies concerned with the history of the genre; research that defines children's literature as a

genre, pointing out its distinct features; studies that approach children's literature from the perspective of critical theory; scholarship concerned with the impact of children's literature on its readers in terms of ideological assumptions, and studies focusing on how child and childhood are delineated in such texts (1). Belonging to the third category, Charlotte Beyer's volume *Contemporary Children's and Young Adult Literature: Writing Back to History and Oppression* employs modern, state-of-the-art critical approaches in its analysis of social justice as a theme that is dealt with from the perspective of class, race or gender, in genres ranging from coming-of-age to dystopia, and from experimental hybrid literary forms to detective or historical fiction.

The book reflects the author's "sense of the urgency and depth of contemporary children's and young adult fiction and its treatment of themes which are crucial to the contemporary period" (2). A great merit of Beyer's book lies in the fact that she treats the texts as literary texts proper (not as forms of entertainment or educational tools), investigating them against the background of contemporary critical and cultural discussions. It provides enlightening approaches to reading the books, examining their settings, and considering what difficulties and opportunities for fresh perspectives result from applying this scholarly lens. Beyer successfully illustrates "the significance of contemporary children's and juvenile literature in portraying and challenging hegemonies, whether these are patriarchal, colonial, racial, gendered, or geographical" (4). She resorts to close readings of the texts, using feminist and postcolonial theories as well as critical concepts and analytical notions.

What runs like a red thread throughout the book is the investigation of oppression and the process of writing back to history through which representations of history are challenged and reassessed by foregrounding the perspectives of the marginalized and the silenced. This is done in parallel with the delineation of the specific contexts and circumstances described in the selected novels in order to avoid an ahistorical or schematic interpretation of these key themes. It goes without saying that the author is not concerned with history as an academic discipline but with the way in which history emerges in literary texts as cultural narratives.

It is interesting that the novels Beyer has selected for investigation in her book are both established texts and lesser-known works, chosen from a large variety of cultural spaces ranging from Great Britain, Ireland, USA, Sweden, the Caribbean, New Zealand and Australia. The large

majority of texts were written in English but Beyer also includes texts in translation, which challenge her to highlight cultural shades and to be cautious in her evaluation of texts against canonical texts. Furthermore, as the author explains in the Introduction, the “contemporary” in the title denotes novels that were released from the middle of the 20th century up to and including the 21st century.

The book is structured into three interconnected parts that investigate particular themes in eight novels addressing children and young adults. Each part is made up of individual chapters that focus on a single novel, combining close textual analysis and contextualization with the expressed intent of providing in-depth textual analysis and the application of critical and theoretical viewpoints in order to fully examine each novel’s unique themes and narrative elements against the background of their cultural and national contexts.

Thus, Part One focuses on social justice and crime in relation to *Rasmus and the Tramp* (1956) by Astrid Lindgren and *Sold* (2007) by Patricia McCormick, two novels which show how discussions of social justice themes have changed in the course of time, but also how the crime fiction genre has been used in various historical times to criticize social and cultural issues. Part Two examines how modern children’s and young adult books set in postcolonial and multicultural environments reflect back to history and challenge established historical narratives, creating alternate accounts of historical events that highlight marginalized viewpoints. This is carried out in parallel with an investigation of the relationship between identity, nation, race and history in *Spirit of the Titanic* (2011) by Nicola Pierce, *How the Finnegans Saved the Ship* (2001) by Jackie French and *A Medal for Leroy* (2012) by Michael Morpurgo. Beyer focuses on vital issues such as representations of migration, national and cultural identification processes, the complexities of race and ethnicity, and the effects of racism, xenophobia, religious conflict, and persecution that adumbrate the relationship between identity and nation at various levels. Part Three investigates the imbrications of oppression and resistance in postcolonial times, from the perspective of gender and identity, in three young adult novels: *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970) by Merle Hodge, *Vulture’s Gate* (2009) by Kirsty Murray, and *The Whale Rider* (1987) by Witi Ihimaera. The interweaving of gender, ecocriticism and postcolonialism in spaces such as the Caribbean, New Zealand,

Australia is cleverly analyzed in order to highlight children's and young adults' fiction in a variety of genres and styles.

The author has consistently followed her rationale in the selection of texts. She has selected compelling, complex, well-crafted narratives that offer a heavy emphasis on one or more of the central topics dealt with in the three sections of the book, contributing significantly to current social and cultural discussions about a large variety of issues of topical interest. On the other hand, the principle of inclusivity followed by the author has helped her shed light on contemporary global literary landscapes in diverse social, cultural, racial, and linguistic contexts. By selecting novels from the earlier decades of the contemporary period, Beyer has been able to point to the evolution of the genre, from a diachronic point of view. The author has also resorted to a geographical lens, shedding light on various spaces of the former Commonwealth, engaging and advancing discussions about world literature, about the relationship between the local and the global, about how the global imbricates with the glocal.

Empathy and affect in the creation of characters have been vital to the texts selected by the author. They pave the way for reader identification, resulting in fresh insights in the area of children's and young adult literature scholarship. In addition to it, the plurality of perspectives and close attention to cultural shades in its investigation of topics and representations from such a wide range of cultural contexts goes hand in hand with an awareness of how assessment of texts against canonical texts may be problematic and may lead to generalizations and erasures.

Beyond the erudite scholarly analysis of the selected texts, the book represents an impassioned plea to both scholars and readers to recognize the enormous potential of children's and young adult literature seen as "a vital genre with intellectual, emotional and creative powers which deserves further critical engagement" (223). Readers and students of children's and young adult literature will have a field day but will also learn much from Beyer's knowledgeable and critically acute book.

ALEXANDRA MITREA
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania

Works Cited

- Reynolds, Kimberley. *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2007.
- Shavit, Zohar. *Poetics of Children's Literature*. U of Georgia P, 1986.