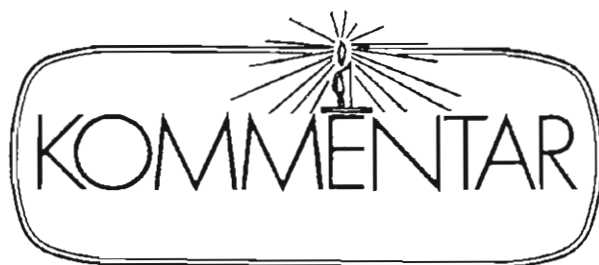


Barnboken

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Den svenska barnbokens jubileumsår är över, men livet och barnlitteraturen går vidare... För att summera och avsluta jubileet uppmärksammar vi de sista evenemangen i detta nummer. I fortsättningen finns dokumentation av året arkiverad på SBI, för den som är intresserad.

Den här gången har annars Barnboken en internationell touch, som omväxling efter vårt helsvenska jubileum. Två av uppsatserna, Zohar Shavits och Maria Nikolajevas, har tidigare presenterats vid IRSC:s tionde internationella forskarkonferens i Paris augusti 1991 (uttytt International Research Society for Children's Literature). Shavits tankeväckande och provocerande inlägg återges i oförändrat skick, medan Nikolajeva översatt och arbetat om sin efter svenska förhållanden. Vi väntar med spänning på reaktioner och svar från Barnbokens läsare! Den tredje längre uppsatsen, Eva-Maria Metcalfs om Tormod Haugen, visar det stora intresse för och kunskap om skandinavisk litteratur som finns utomlands, inte minst i USA. Vi presenterar också en del internationella nyheter i biblioteket som komplement till de nordiska.

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EVA NORDLINDER

The study of children's literature:
The poor state of the art
Why do we need a theory
and why semiotics of culture?

ZOHAR SHAVIT

This paper was presented at the IRSCCL 10th biennial Congress, Paris 1991

If the title of this paper strikes you as provocative and programmatic, you are absolutely right. That is exactly what it is meant to be.

To be honest with ourselves, let's face it: the study of children's literature is not highly respected in the academic world, especially by its ostensibly natural sister discipline, the sphere of so-called "literary studies", nor is it really legitimized. When at all tolerated, it is perceived as a peripheral and insignificant field of research. Straightforwardly said, research of children's literature suffers from an inferior status in the academic world. This status, however, can be well justified from the academic point of view.

Before explaining why I believe it is well-justified, I feel I should share with you my apprehension about presenting such a unflattering description of the field and its current state of affairs. Why play the devil's advocate?

The answer is simple: I sincerely believe in the scholarly value of the field; I also believe that a lot has recently been achieved, but much more is yet to be accomplished; and I believe that we are facing the danger of resting on our laurels without being fully aware of where we stand. In light of this, I have decided in favor of delivering a programmatic paper.

With regard to the first part of my question: why do we need a theory?

To most philosophers of science and to most scholars involved in scientific work this would seem an inadequate question. Most philosophers of science would agree that any research of academic aspirations is unworkable without the support of a theory, namely, without an explicit or implicit set of concepts which establish a distinct set of questions. This set of questions designates the scope of the research, its corpus, its line of argument and its course of development. If we adopt this understanding of a scientific work as our point of departure, the issue at stake is not whether the academic study of children's literature must take place within a theoretical framework. The issue at stake is, which theory can provide the best framework for our academic needs.

I would like to emphasize right now that I strongly reject the juxtaposition between competing theories implied by the title of some sessions of this conference. When structuralism, semiotics, feminism etc. are put in one pot, no more than lip service can be paid to the academic enterprise. Competing theories, if they are indeed competing in terms of their conceptual perception of the issues involved, exclude each other. As such they do

not belong to the same "family of theories". There is conceptually no way to reconcile them: they differ in their basic assumptions, in their interests, and in fact in their subject matter. When analyzed in scrutiny it becomes obvious that quite often they do not even relate to the same field. The fashionable attempt to bring them together fails to take note of these differences and their lack of a common scientific language, and can not carry research very far.

It is true that all scholars stand to benefit from the results of research done in fields other than their own; only a narrowminded scholar would deny that. But scholars who wish to develop their own research and present new questions systematically, must work within a coherent framework of theoretical concepts. Needless to say, this set of theoretical notions should be continuously and permanently examined and re-examined.

Scientific work will be rewarding only after one has decided in favor of a specific and well defined theory, one whose framework will allow for maximum achievement. After reading a large portion of the studies on children's literature, I cannot but conclude that such decisions have quite often not been made. Consequently, the field of children's literature which has just made its debut into the academic world and is literally in the process of development, has failed to properly utilize the potential of the field and to gain recognition as an important field of research. In most cases it was placed in the hands of scholars who lacked an adequate theoretical framework. Quite a few scholars, especially in the United States, preferred to study children's literature within the context of traditional and rather worn-out questions of "Literary Criticism".

In the western academic world, especially in the United States, the field of literary studies is still often governed by traditional questions of either "literature criticism" or "positivistic historicism". Despite the use of new terms, with the help of which the ostensible "new" theories strive to prop themselves up,

more often than not they base their work on the same old assumptions, decorating them with a selection of glossy new terms.

Discussion of the state of the art of literary studies in the western world today calls for a separate debate. Here I would just like to elaborate a little on the point of departure of these disciplines and to explain why, in my view, research of children's literature cannot find an appropriate niche among them.

In the framework of traditional literary studies, the main criterion for selecting an object for study has always been its aesthetic value. The main business of traditional literary studies is to attribute to literary texts a certain value, thus establishing a cultural paradigm, and participating in its creation. According to this approach texts are discussed in order to explore their merits and values.

Due to the circumstances of its development children's literature tends to maintain a different set of literary norms from the current norms governing adult literature. Furthermore, the governing literary norms of the adult literature are indeed transformed at a later stage of development into children's literature, but their transformation involves a process of simplification. Hence for instance, when norms of sophistication or complexity prevail in adult literature, they will be extensively modified or sometimes even altogether discarded in children's literature. Since societal literary norms demand that writing for children be different from writing for adults, attributing a "high literary quality" to books for children becomes impossible.

Academic studies of children's literature which were carried out in the framework of literary criticism tried to force on children's books the literary values of adult literature. However, since the bulk of children's books differ in their literary norms from the adult, those studies sought for the blue bird where it could not be found, and resulted quite often in a near parody on literary interpretation.

It is difficult (though not impossible) to find in books for children what they don't contain. Scholars have been thus disappointed

in children's literature and their next step was to reject it altogether.

I concede that the process described above can be viewed as reasonable but is far from being inevitable. Two are to be blamed for it: the theoretical decisions of the scholars involved and lack of compatibility between the norms governing adult literature and those of the children's literature.

As I have already said, the governing norms of adult literature eliminate almost entirely the possibility that books for children could be highly evaluated. This, I believe is one of the reasons for the peripheral status assigned to the study of children's literature almost from its inception, even before it began to develop properly.

The adherence of the field to what was already known and accepted, and its inability to release itself from the conceptual bonds of the past contributed as well. We may ask why scholars venturing into a new academic field preferred to work in a traditional discipline.

Perhaps because they lacked the self-assurance required for a theoretical venture. People felt more secure and self-assured sticking to familiar issues that had already been raised, because *their choice of the field of study was problematic enough*. The result, however, has been unmistakable. In spite of the massive spurt of so-called research of children's literature, we cannot really admit pride in a great many achievements. The main outcome has been that a great deal of the research has underlined the somewhat deflated image of the field, and strengthened the opposition between "serious" research on "serious" works of literature, and the less important type of research, i.e. that which dominates children's literature.

In this way, a field that had hardly begun to gain recognition has in fact been totally undermined by the most outdated notions of literary research, having virtually nothing new to offer, except for a new corpus, which in any case is regarded by "people in the culture" as peripheral and unimportant.

At the other side of this vicious circle we confront the academic establishment, which like any other establishment is reluctant to accept changes, especially when less prestigious matters are involved. The "commodity" to use Bourdieu's term, offered by scholars of children's literature, has not successfully convinced the academic world to accept children's literature as a legitimate field of research among literary studies. Most universities have been reluctant to admit children's literature into the curriculum. Most well known Universities in the United States, the United Kingdom and France, for instance, do not even offer courses in children's literature, not to mention full programs.

Even in cases when children's literature is taught at a university level, even when we find odds and ends of research here and there, we should not be deluded: when children's literature is taught at a university, it is being no more than tolerated as a *step-sister* of "general" literature studies.

Being the step-sister, the Cinderella of literary studies, entails several implications. Like Cinderella, who has to prove that she can indeed wear the right shoe, a scholar of children's literature is usually asked to prove that he or she can wear the hat of "a real scholar" if he or she wishes to be accepted by scholars of "general literary studies". Only if one is highly esteemed in a field other than children's literature, does one stand a fair chance of becoming a member of the academic-literary community. Under these circumstances research of children's literature is most likely to be regarded at worst as a whim, or at best, as an additional dimension to be used in the framework of other disciplines such as education, sociology and psychology.

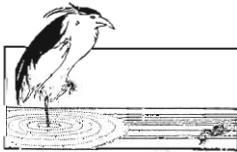
It should however be emphasized, that at least one field of research indeed flourished despite the overall sterile state of the field. I refer here to the historical studies of children's literature, which have managed in the last two decades to yield significant and even innovative scholarly works.

Why has historical research been so fruit-

ful? Why did it manage to succeed where other aspects of study failed? The answer seems clear: The scholarly results of the historical research of children's literature were valuable due to the nature of the questions raised, and the disciplines that have been used. What historical research has retained that other spheres of research lacked, was a clear system of theoretical concepts which allowed it to pursue an adequate standard of research.

Here then lies the difference: Unlike other domains, historical research of children's literature managed to introduce into the academic world a new corpus which was never dealt with before; *factors and issues which previously were not taken into account proved to be of substantial importance for our understanding of European cultural life*, including some of their more intimate aspects. By inquiring into this new domain, research proved to shed a new light on cultural history.

Hence, it was *an appropriate set of questions which otherwise could not have been dealt with so expediently* that allowed for the potential of the field to be materialized and to become a noteworthy issue for research. Indeed, I believe that in terms of the history of culture and cultural mechanisms, children's literature offers the most fascinating and most fruitful fields of research. This is the case because no other field equals children's literature in the immense scope of the cultural parameters involved.



This, in my view, should be at the heart of our drive for studying children's literature. The rationale for choosing children's literature as an object for research should be the extent of its ability to raise questions and issues other than those raised by existing academic fields.

Children's literature results from a conglomerate of relationships between several systems in culture, among which the most im-

portant are the social, the educational and the literary. If one is interested in studying such complex relationships in culture, if one is interested in the mechanism of culture and its dynamics, one can find the most promising ground for research in children's literature.

Furthermore, children's literature is the only system I know of, that belongs *simultaneously* and indispensably to the literary and the social-educational systems. It is the only system whose products have always addressed two oppositional addressees, whose contradicting wishes and expectations it has to fulfill.

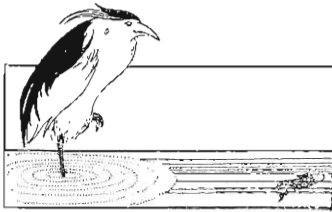
No other field is to quite the same extent the result of such diverse cultural constraints; consequently, no other field enables us to inquire into the mechanism of culture, cultural manipulations and cultural procedures in the same way as does children's literature. Some excellent studies of childhood, children's culture and children's literature published in recent years support, I believe, my conviction and point to the huge potential of the field.

From what I have already said, it is clear that I hold the research of children's literature among traditional literary studies to be misplaced. If we believe in the sincerity of the field and if we wish to change its inferior status, to make it part of the curriculum, we must first insist on proper place for it amongst other academic studies. This entails our acceptance once and for all of the idea that in a field governed by questions of aesthetic value (or more accurately, questions of current aesthetic values, since I assume that eternal or universal aesthetic values do not exist at all), children's literature will always find itself in a subordinate position. Here children's literature will never be accepted as a legitimate field of research, except in a few cases, which are the exception rather than the rule. Yes, it makes sense to discuss *Alice in Wonderland* and *Watership Down* in the framework of the questions offered by traditional literary studies (though this may not necessarily be very interesting), but these works belong to a limited

number of texts which are purposely designated officially for children but appeal in fact to adults (an issue with which I have dealt elsewhere). At any rate these works of literature are but an exception which proves my general argument: they do not represent the substance of children's literature, not even in terms of the official system of books for children; *consequently scholars who study them can not but be pretending to deal with "children's literature"*.

Dare we elaborate the metaphor of Cinderella by slightly changing our fairy (this is after all one of our few privileges), I believe that in trying to place the study of children's literature among traditional literary studies, we are trying on the wrong shoe. Like the sisters of Cinderella who cut off their toes and heels respectively, we would be cutting off our noses to spite our faces if we try to fit the shoe; we shall have achieved little, and be handicapped to boot.

I must state that neither do I see much point in trying to change this state of affairs. Culture, by its very nature, is stratified and hierarchical. Trying to change the status of children's literature is bound to become a waste of time and will not lead us anywhere. Instead we can make this unequivocal feature of children's literature an object of our research and try to understand why children's literature had been inferior from its very foundation, which cultural forces dictated this status, and what are the textual and other implications of its position in culture.



If the traditional road cannot lead us very far, which road should we take then?

I would like to propose a change in our postulate of the study of children's literature. Our set of preliminary assumptions must

change: we should not rest our approach on value judgment, neither on "educational purposes". As I have already claimed, evaluative questions, by their very nature, limit the scope of the research, and in the case of children's literature they may even become a boomerang. Educational aspirations turn children's literature into a mere vehicle for achieving other goals. Such an approach is of course justifiable in the framework of pedagogues; it actually constitutes the core of their undertaking. The mandate given to them is exactly this one, but this does not necessarily mean that pedagogical issues should determine *our* options or objectives of research, as has been the case more often than not.

In order to free our discussion from such limitations, our point of departure should assume that children's literature is an integral part of a stratified system. Secondly, normative or ideological questions must be totally excluded from research practice, and not, as is often the case, by paying lip service to the idea. The change I am talking about must take place in the set of the concepts involved, and not in their decoration.

As a first step a descriptive-analytical approach must be adopted, instead of the normative one. This means that the texts for discussion should be selected not on the basis of their value judgment, but due to their *significance for the issue at stake and their capability to illuminate it*. Thus, texts will be studied not because they are believed to be of high literary value, or of high educational value, but *because their analysis can contribute to a better understanding of a specific literary-cultural phenomenon*.

The benefits of such an approach are, so it seems, selfevident.

1. A normative approach considerably limits the scope of questions. Moreover, it imposes on scholars the task of a critic whose main, if not sole, responsibility is to determine the public's taste. Such a task, important as it is, simply does not belong to our domain of research. Rather it belongs to the domain of "people-in-the-culture", who are given by society the mandate to determine the public's

taste. Thus, the first step which must be taken involves a redefinition of the boundaries between research and criticism which have been obscured in some traditional literary studies.

Once the boundaries become clear, as well as the mandate given to the scholar, scholars will be free to do scientific work, rather than to interfere with that of the critic. This of course does not mean that as people-in-the-culture we cannot take part in the process of determining public taste, nor that as scholars we cannot describe this process and account for it, or wear the hat of critics outside our scholarly work and take part in this process. It only means that the two different spheres will not be confused. In the same way that we do not become children while reading children's literature, we should not change into critics when we are involved in the scholarly investigation of children's literature.

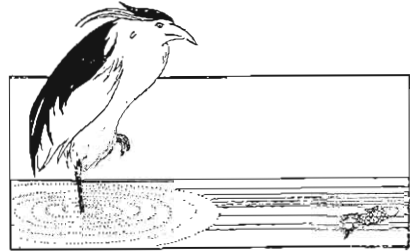
2. Adopting an analytical-descriptive approach will liberate the scholar from the false need to prove the "literary quality" of the texts involved. Texts will be selected for discussion solely on the basis of their value as objects for study. Furthermore, research will not be limited to discussion of a text or a group of texts. Questions other than textual, for instance, questions pertaining to the cultural context in which texts for children are written and their models are created, will be raised.

This leads me to the most important issue of my discussion.

3. Such an approach will allow for raising *new questions* whose potential is virtually unlimited. As we all know the ability to propose new questions is of great importance for the vitality of any scholarly work. When the same questions are being repeated over and over again, the discipline in which they are asked tends to exhaust itself rather rapidly. It is the existence of a reservoir of new questions, or the very existence of its potential, which ensures the ongoing vitality of any discipline.

I contend that in terms of the existing disciplines in humanities, the one which can best ensure such a vitality is *semiotics of culture*. In short, I believe that the time has come to re-

lease children's literature from the restrictive frameworks of either pedagogic, social studies, education or traditional literary research and to discuss it instead in the framework of poetics and semiotics.



What are the implications of working in the framework of semiotics of culture?

Semiotics of culture assumes that the most profitable way to deal with dynamics of culture is in terms of systems and their function in culture. With this postulate as its point of departure semiotics of culture enables us to handle the multi-system situation typical of children's literature and the various implications of it. Since it postulates the hierarchal organization of culture, it does not try to participate in the process of determining the hierarchy, but rather asks how it was created. Thus, in this frame of reference there is no need to change the evaluation of texts for children, in order to legitimize their study, nor to perform social justice, as in the case of some schools of sociology in England and Germany.

In this frame of reference the only criterion for selecting an object for discussion is its relevance to the questions raised, questions to which children's literature, by its very nature, can provide one of the best possible playgrounds. One of the advantages of a semiotic discipline lies in the options of its spectrum, its flexibility and its openness. A semiotic frame of reference is very ambitious with regard to the almost unlimited perspectives it involves, but it is also very modest, or if you wish, unambitious with regard to the answers concerned. This is so first of all because of the

methodological possibilities which enable us to deal with minor as well as major segments of culture, and secondly because semiotics of culture does not seek to establish monopolies over answers. Quite the contrary, by its very nature it almost rules out the possibility of a simple, one-sided answer for any question.

As I have said, the study of children's literature in the framework of semiotics of culture, promises to be most fruitful in dealing with a conglomerate of cultural relationships, provided by children's literature. From this perspective, it seems to me that "the sky's the limit", and it would be impossible to cover here even a small range of the possible options.

A thorough description of the hidden possibilities of semiotics of children's literature is not only time consuming; at this stage it is unfortunately an impossible mission, as the field has only just begun to blossom. Yet, because semiotics of culture is already considerably accomplished, and even more crucial, because quite a few scholars of children's literature have done semiotic research without explicitly indicating this as such, (in the same way that Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentil Homme* spoke prose), it is possible to outline some directions of research.

In a semiotic conceptual framework children's literature is understood as one component in a multi-system of signs, which maintains a complicated network of relationships with other systems, and whose processes of developments are determined by these relations.

When children's literature is understood as such, one can inquire into children's literature in the broadest possible context – into its multi-relationship with social norms, literary norms and educational norms, and analyze how texts for children are a product of this complicated net of relationships. Furthermore, one can examine how in turn texts for children shape societal ideals and ideas and take part in transforming them into new patterns.

Issues of a very broad nature can be raised, such as, who is culturally responsible for children's literature as a literary product of socie-

ty, or how is it possible to understand the behaviour of children's literature as a result of various cultural constraints, or what is the particular cultural context in which children's literature has developed, what are the relationships between cultural concepts, images and societal consciousness and the texts produced for the child.

- Why is children's literature the only literary system nowadays which is perceived by culture as belonging to both the educational and the literary systems at one and the same time?
- What are the implications of this dual attribution?
- How does it affect the development, structure, textual options, readers and writers of children's literature?
- How and to what extent do notions of childhood determine the character of the texts for the child as far as poetic norms are concerned and in regard to the acceptance of the texts by the "people in the culture"?
- How do writers for children react to such societal and poetic demands in producing their texts?

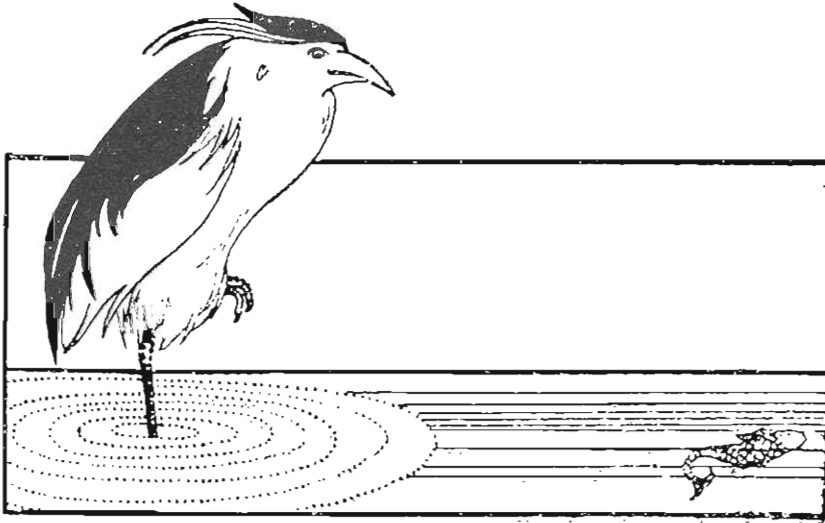
In responding to these questions the systemic implications of the status of children's literature in culture must be taken into account. By doing so it becomes clear that the processes and procedures involved in the production of the children's system are neither random nor static. Research shows that they can be described as having an accountable and recurring pattern, as dynamic processes, governing the history and the development of children's literature since its inception.

The few questions to which I have just pointed do not of course offer a full program. One of the major tasks of a program for the field will be to outline a new set of questions which would suggest directions of studies and open the field to new possibilities of research. It is, after all, the very objective of a theory to make relevant as many questions as possible that guarantee its flexibility and its capacity to survive.

Time permitting, I would have illustrated my argument with some case studies. But since time does not allow for this, let me just remark, that any illustration would have pointed to only some possibilities the semiotics of children's literature may propose. Even then, my examples would be just one road at the intricate crossroads of children's literature. It is semiotics of culture which will enable us to

walk with ease in this complicated woods, without getting lost amongst the trees.

If I am to use less poetical terms, which it may well be better to do, I would say that the time has come to extricate children's literature from the narrow boundaries of the past and to place it in the foreground of literary scholarship, amongst semiotics of culture, squarely facing the future.



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Omslagsbild ur Eva Billows *Pojkarna Igelkotts vinterskor* (1948)